Conceptualizing organizational discourse as situated symbolic action

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ABSTRACT   This article presents a conceptualization of organizational discourse as situated symbolic action, drawing from the fields of speech act theory, rhetoric, ethnography of communication and social constructionism. This conceptualization is illustrated through analysis of an episode of negotiated order accessed through an organization development intervention; a meeting of senior managers of Systech, a major IT organization, to decide on a new business model. This perspective helps to respond to some of the key challenges facing the organizational discourse field in terms of developing more clearly specified conceptualizations of discourse suited to the organizational level of analysis, achieving a more holistic and discourse-sensitive understanding of empirical contexts by organizational researchers, and illustrating that organizational discourse analysis is not simply an intellectual luxury but can have pragmatic, relevant implications.

This article presents a conceptualization of organizational discourse as situated symbolic action, drawing from the fields of speech act theory, rhetoric, ethnography of communication and social constructionism. Speech act theory presents a theory of discourse as *action*, but essentially remains at the micro-level of interaction, without sufficient attention to context and to intertextual analysis. Rhetoric is introduced as an approach that can address

both text and context, viewing discourse as a *situated* social practice. Further support for discourse as a situated practice comes from ethnographies of communication. Lastly, social constructionism is discussed as a perspective that emphasizes the *symbolic* nature of discourse, both at the level of discursive action and at the level of bodies of discourse and their meta-communicative effects of framing issues in particular ways.

The conceptualization of organizational discourse as situated symbolic action is illustrated through analysis of an episode of negotiated order, a meeting of senior managers of Systech, a major IT organization where a new business model for its Advanced Services Division was being debated. The business model favored by the recently hired group president entailed a move from the more traditional, functionally based, distributed model of client engagement employed at the division to a 'principal-centered' consulting model involving principals who 'owned' clients and were responsible for all aspects of client engagement. This move would entail a substantial reallocation of power, status and influence within the division and was hotly contested. At a pivotal moment in the meeting, the chief advocate of the 'principal-centered' model acknowledged that things were different in Systech and therefore some responsibilities could be shared, rather than fully led by the relevant principal. This led to a more cooperative, productive discussion in which an entirely new integrative model was developed, labelled by the participants as 'The Advanced Services Division Business Model'. When the output was given to the group president, who had not attended the meeting, he added '(principal-led)' to the name, re-affirming his desire for a business model with most of the power and status given to principals.

We proceed by analyzing this episode through the lens of discourse as situated symbolic action as witnessed and experienced by the facilitator of the meeting. There are three levels of analysis involved that are complementary and additive. We first adopt the view of discourse as action, examining what the participants said and what they may have intended to achieve through their communicative actions in the meeting. We then proceed to viewing discourse as situated action, examining the added value that arises from a knowledge of the different levels of context (interactional, organizational and industry) in discursive analysis. Lastly, we proceed to the level of discourse as situated symbolic action. In addition to the examination of discourse from the perspective of what was said and what the participants intended to achieve (discourse as action), and to the contribution of contextual knowledge (discourse as situated action), viewing discourse as situated symbolic action adds a sensitivity to deeper considerations of how discourse frames, constructs and represents issues in particular ways. For example, how discursive interactions that on the surface appear simply as an exchange

of information can mirror considerations of power, and archetypal struggles for control and dominance.

We conclude by drawing some implications of conceptualizing and analyzing discourse as situated symbolic action. We suggest that this perspective helps to respond to some of the key challenges facing the organizational discourse field in terms of developing more structured and clearly specified conceptualizations of discourse that are appropriate to the organizational level of analysis; achieving a more holistic and discourse-sensitive understanding of empirical contexts by organizational researchers; and lastly illustrating that organizational discourse analysis is not simply an intellectual luxury but can have pragmatic, relevant implications.

Conceptualizing discourse as situated symbolic action

Several scholars have called for the development of discourse analysis approaches that not only consider the text as a data source, but are also more contextually sensitive and holistic, paying attention to how nested levels of context such as the interactional, organizational and societal contexts interrelate and interpenetrate with the text (Hardy, 2001; Keenoy et al., 1997). According to Cicourel (1981), for example, 'the study of discourse and the larger context of social interaction requires explicit reference to a broader organizational setting and aspects of cultural beliefs often ignored by students of discourse' (p. 102). In addition, Fairclough has observed that 'analysis of text is perceived as frequently proceeding with scant attention to context', and urged that 'discourse analysis needs a developed sense of and systematic approach to *both* context *and* text' (Fairclough, 1992: 212–13, emphases in original).

Unfortunately, some approaches which began with interpretive/ hermeneutic inspirations such as ethnomethodology, stressing features of language such as indexicality (the notion that language use and interpretation depends on contextual features) and the temporality of social activity (where social action is understood and analyzed with regard to its temporal location), have gradually proceeded to restrict themselves to behaviorist straitjackets which can hinder them from grasping the richness of social life, as in the form most ethnomethodological conversation analysis has taken (Atkinson, 1988).

However, several useful approaches for integrating context in organizational discourse analysis have been developed. These include critical discourse analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 1993, 2001), social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress et al., 1997), rhetorical analysis (Aristotle, 1991; Gill & Whedbee, 1997), or ethnography of communication

(Gumperz & Levinson, 1991; Hymes 1964, 1972). In this context, and with the organizational level of analysis in mind, we propose an approach for addressing the integration of text, context and symbolic meaning through conceptualizing organizational discourse[1] as *situated symbolic action*. This conceptualization draws primarily on speech act theory, rhetoric, ethnography of communication and social constructionism.

Discourse as action

Austin's (1962) speech act theory offers an influential statement of *discourse as action*. Austin's work challenged the traditional assumption of the philosophy of language, that 'to say something . . . is always and simply to *state* something', that is either true or false, and developed the influential thesis that 'to *say* something is to *do* something' (p. 12, emphases in original). Austin distinguished analytically between locutionary speech acts, the act of saying something; illocutionary speech acts, what individuals intend to achieve in saying something; and lastly perlocutionary speech acts, the actual effects of utterances on their audience. Of course, it should be noted that an utterance could perform all three speech acts simultaneously.

Extending Austin's speech act theory, Searle (1975) developed more elaborate typologies of illocutionary acts, specified further contextual conditions relevant to their functioning, and introduced the notion of indirect speech acts in which the connection between the intended meaning and the utterance is not clear and direct. In addition to being highly influential in the philosophy of language, the insights of speech act theory formed the theoretical foundation for discourse pragmatics, the study of language-in-use (Blum-Kulka, 1997).

Even though speech act theory has laid the groundwork for understanding discourse as action, it essentially remains at the micro-level of single utterances without extending to the broader level of discourses as bodies of texts pervaded or patterned by structural features (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). So, for example, speech act theory does not readily apply to what van Dijk (1977) has termed 'macro' speech acts, or Alvesson and Karreman (2000) term 'grand' or 'mega' discourses. It also tends to focus on the text itself without explicitly considering context as a crucial resource for interpreting texts as socially and contextually located entities.

Discourse as situated action

Several fields, including semiotics, rhetoric and ethnographies of communication, have acknowledged and theorized a contextualized view of discourse, from which we draw to develop our view of *discourse as situated action*.

In semiotics, for example, Jakobson's (1960) framework has been influential in grounding language use in an interactional setting, suggesting that the constitutive events of any speech event include addresser, addressee, message, context, code and contact:

> the addresser sends a message to the addressee. To be operative the message requires a context referred to . . . seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a code fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee . . . and, finally, a contact, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication.
>
> (Jakobson, 1960: 353)

However, Jakobson has posited the function of context as 'referential' or 'denotative' (an indexical perspective on context as the referent of the message; a view that became influential in structuralism and related fields), and in this sense his conception of context was relatively circumscribed, in comparison with other fields such as rhetoric and ethnographies of communication.[2]

Rhetoric encompasses a holistic conception of context that includes various aspects of the situation, the audience, the rhetor, as well as textual features such as structure and temporality, enthymemes, metaphor and iconicity. These are researched, not for their own sake, but to discover how rhetorical discourse can influence actors' perceptions and interpretations by eloquently and persuasively espousing particular views of the world (Aristotle, 1991; Gill & Whedbee, 1997). Rhetorical principles have been fruitfully applied to wider, macro-level discourses to explore the discourses' constructive effects on people's interpretations and opinions of pressing social issues (e.g. Charland, 1987; Gronbeck, 1973).

Rhetoric also aims to explore the 'dynamic interaction of a rhetorical text with its context' (Gill & Whedbee, 1997). The important influence of the context or situation on what should and could be said was highlighted by Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as 'an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion' (Aristotle, 1991: 36). Bitzer (1968) furthermore suggested that a situation is not simply a necessary condition of rhetorical discourse, but, more importantly, that rhetorical discourse is constructed with a view to addressing particular situational exigencies, as well as imbued with significance by those exigencies.

Ethnographies of communication (Hymes, 1964) offer further support for a view of discourse as situated action, emphasizing that discourse cannot be adequately understood, or appropriately produced in separation from its

context of use. Frake (1964), for example, has shown how in one tribe, 'drinking talk' is simultaneously social interaction, entertainment and the de facto governance institution, where leaders are determined based on their skill at 'talking from the straw', both in terms of rational as well as aesthetic discourse. In an organizational context, Samra-Fredericks (2003) has employed an ethnographic approach combined with conversation analysis to study the process and accomplishment of everyday strategizing, presenting a fine-grained analysis of talk in context, and how everyday talk links to the accomplishment of strategy.

Finally, Hymes (1964) has proposed several useful contextual elements for understanding communicative events: the participants, channels, shared codes, setting, messages and topics. These elements were later extended and synthesized in terms of the influential SPEAKING[3] framework (Hymes, 1972). The embeddedness of discourse in its context, in addition, is not limited to the immediate situation, but is nested in wider social and cultural systems: 'aspects of meaning and interpretation are determined by culture-specific activities and practices . . . [which] are interconnected in turn with the larger sociopolitical systems that govern and are in part constituted by them' (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991: 614).

Discourse as symbolic action

Constructionist approaches present *discourse as symbolic action*, viewing reality as a social construction and individuals as symbol creators and consumers (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). As Phillips and Hardy (2002) assert, 'without discourse, there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse we cannot understand our reality, our experiences or ourselves' (p. 2). The main aim of constructionist approaches is to understand this constructive process through hermeneutic exploration of the discourses involved. Berger and Luckmann (1966), in their influential statement of social constructionism, suggested that social reality is known to individuals in terms of symbolic universes constructed through social interaction. They viewed language as the 'most important sign system of human society' (p. 51), the primary means through which 'objectivation', the manifestation of subjective meanings through actions, proceeds. Language makes subjective meanings 'real', and at the same time typifies these meanings through creating 'semantic fields or zones of meaning' within which daily routines proceed.

Searle (1995) more recently provided a further landmark rendition of social constructionism in his view of institutional facts as language-dependent, in the sense that such facts could not exist if it was not for the human faculty of language. Searle views language as epistemically indispensable for representing as well as constituting knowledge on complex

Table 1 Discourse as situated symbolic action

Discourse as	Main proposition	Theoretical domains	Potential foci for discourse analysis
Action	Discourse does not just *say* things, but *does* things	Speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975)	What is said, and what does the communicative action intend to accomplish?
Situated action	Discourse is fully meaningful only if viewed in context	Rhetoric (Aristotle, 1991; Gill & Whedbee, 1997); Ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1964, 1972)	How can contextual knowledge inform discourse analysis? What does discourse reveal about its context?
Symbolic action	Discourse is symbolic and constructive at multiple levels including the semantic, meta-communicative and inter-personal levels	Social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Searle, 1995)	What constructions and evaluations does discourse implicitly promote? How do these discursive constructions relate to context? What is happening at a deeper level?

social facts, knowledge that cannot be communicated save for the use of language, and that persists over time by virtue of the human ability to couch such knowledge in linguistic terms.

Discourse, in addition, creates mental frames that are 'metacommunicative' (Bateson, 1972), simultaneously highlighting certain meanings and excluding others. Discourse is thus not simply symbolic at the semantic level, by virtue of being composed of signs, but at a broader level of framing, evoking particular typifications and associations through connotation (Phillips & Brown, 1993) and inviting others to view the world in these terms. This is what Fairclough (2003) means when he refers to *discourses* (in the plural), as 'positioned representations' that give rise to corresponding conceptualizations of social relations and social practices.

Discursive construction takes place through social interaction; in the organizational context it occurs when managers 'author' their experiences in the process of interacting with others, simultaneously constructing a shared sense of their identities, their organization, and of appropriate ways to talk and act (Cunliffe, 2001). Language, in this perspective, does not simply mirror social reality but constitutes it, creating conditioned rationalities as widespread ways of thinking within particular social systems (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). Table 1 provides an outline of the above discussion,

and also suggests foci for organizational discourse analysis at each level of discourse. We next turn to a discussion and analysis of a discourse as situated symbolic action approach applied to an organizational episode.

Background and methodological approach

Establishing contact and preliminary data gathering

In the spring of 2002 one of the authors met with the president and vice president (VP), human resources (HR) of one of the major divisions of Systech to discuss a potential organization development intervention with regard to addressing a number of issues. These included pressures from the president's boss (the group president) to change the organization's operating structure and culture, effectively integrate a recent acquisition and create alignment on business strategy within the top team of executives. At that time, detailed information was provided about the situation and the actors involved which were recorded in notes taken during and immediately after the interview discussion. This information was further augmented and documented during two subsequent telephone discussions with the VP, HR about how best to pursue the situation. Shortly thereafter, however, the budding project was 'indefinitely delayed,' according to the VP, HR, 'because the president was too consumed with the operational issues of a new work programme.'

　　No further contact occurred until almost 6 months later when the VP, HR called and desperately requested help for a critical meeting that would take place in two days. The VP, HR explained that 'the president had decided at the last minute that they needed a good facilitator otherwise the meeting could be a real disaster and that you knew the background and seemed to have the skills.' After agreeing to help out on this extremely short notice, additional information was provided by the VP, HR, an assistant to the president, and the president himself in a further telephone conversation. The main objective of the meeting according to the president was to 'get everyone aligned around a new business model being advanced by my boss.' The president went on to say that 'the meeting could be very difficult because most of the top team will be opposed to the proposed new arrangement and I'm not so sure about it myself.'

Facilitating the meeting and conducting action research

For the meeting, the requested form of organization development was to facilitate and make interventions so as to help the group of executives reach

the stated objective of achieving alignment around a new business model. This type of work requires more than good meeting management skills, and depends on the facilitator's competencies to quickly 'read' individual and group dynamics while making choices in real time as to what (and what not) to say and do. Running notes as to the events, impressions, quotes of participants and 'hunches' were kept during the meeting by the facilitator as a way of tracking developments as they emerged. More detailed notes and reflections as to emergent themes and patterns were recorded after the session in preparation for further interventions; and as a means of reflecting on and interpreting what took place in the meeting.

The organization development process reflected in this episode at Systech is consistent with the dominant definition of *action research* as a process of both helping organizations as well as gathering data for further scholarly reflection and potential contribution to knowledge, wherein the researcher is an active, reflective participant in whatever effort is underway (e.g. Checkland & Holwell, 1998; Dickens & Watkins, 1999). Action research aims to describe holistically what happens in naturally occurring settings, and to derive from these observations more broadly applicable principles, or actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1996; Perry & Zuber-Skerritt, 1994).

Some concerns about the action research approach (that arise from a positivist conception of science) include the low reproducibility of setting and findings, limitations on the means of collection and documentation of data, and the manner in which the personal interests, knowledge and competencies of the researcher influence the research (Huxham & Vangen, 2003). These apply to some extent in any research effort. Within the context of the action research approach, it would be impossible to replicate the setting given that it is a live, actual organizational situation with all its inherent complexity. What matters, therefore, is to document as much relevant data as possible, as accurately as possible given the circumstances, be reflective on what the data mean drawing on knowledge of context, apply a thoughtful analytical framework to the data, and arrive at some valid insights that contribute to knowledge in some significant way. In our case, we applied our perspective of discourse as situated symbolic action, described earlier, to arrive at a nested, additive interpretation of the episode reflecting successively increasing complexity, and which were partially tested through real time decisions and choices in the episode.

Some of the important advantages of action research that were applicable in this case, include being taken 'behind the scenes', being afforded access to sensitive information and to participants' real experience as it was happening, as well as access to contextualized and live organizational settings

rather than isolated and segmentalized laboratory experiments or surveys (Huxham & Vangen, 2003; Schein, 1987).

Exploring a process of negotiated order through discourse

We approached the Systech case as an episode of negotiated order, where this negotiation took place in and through discourse. The negotiated order perspective was developed by Strauss and his associates (1963, 1964) through their fieldwork in two psychiatric hospitals, although earlier renditions and aspects of the concept had already been introduced by theorists such as Mead (1934) in his discussion of the nature of society and Goffman (1961), in his analysis of total institutions. The negotiated order perspective suggests that all social order is continually negotiated through communicative actions and that this process is influenced by existing structural arrangements that are themselves the result of earlier negotiations (Fine, 1984). This perspective highlights the first-order meanings of participants in the negotiation process and emphasizes, much like Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, that the social and organizational structures often taken for granted are in fact the outcome of patterns of actions at the micro, interaction level.

The Systech episode of negotiated order presents a vivid illustration of discourse as situated symbolic action. This episode describes how a team of senior managers implicitly negotiated a new organizational arrangement whose outcome would involve substantial power implications; in this sense, also illustrating the political nature of organizations (March, 1962; Mintzberg, 1983). A key discursive element in this story is the specific label that was to be attached to this arrangement; the debate in some ways hinging on whether it should be, or contain, the words 'principal-led'.

The effects of labels on action have been vividly illustrated by Whorf (1941) who discussed several cases in which industrial accidents occurred because the labels used for machinery and other objects mistakenly implied certain qualities (such as non-combustibility) that allowed careless behavior around them. Weick (1995), in addition, described the pivotal role of words and labels in the sense-making process:

> sense is generated by words that are combined into the sentences of conversation to convey something about our ongoing experience . . . Words constrain the saying of what is produced, the categories imposed to see the saying, and the labels with which the conclusions of this process are retained. Thus words matter.
>
> (Weick, 1995: 106)

Labels are thus not simply denotation devices for transferring information, but also emotionally loaded 'containers' that implicitly embody the communicator's evaluations and typifications regarding the issues to which they refer (Hirsch, 1986; Strauss, 1967).

In the Systech episode the prospect of adopting and labeling this new organizational arrangement 'principal-led' created significant political tensions within Systech, because it symbolized the triumph of a consulting business model alien to the organization, where a single principal would dominate and control the process of service provision to clients, within an organization that had traditionally followed a more distributed, decentralized operating model of service provision. 'Principal-led' was, therefore, not simply a rational description of a prospective organizational arrangement, but a label filled with connotation and emotion that would radically alter a traditional way of doing business. 'Principal-led' was set to become the new order of business, structuring agents' actions in the context of service provision, and foreshadowing other contesting organizing possibilities.

An episode in negotiated order: the Systech new business model meeting

The context

Systech[4] is a large, global computer systems and information technology (IT) corporation. Historically, it was a primary provider of computer hardware and support services. In more recent years, it has expanded its system engineering, IT and systems consulting services to become a major provider of information systems hardware, software and consulting services.

In 2002, with the demise of Consultco, a large management services company, the Advanced Services Division (ASD) of Systech saw an opportunity to expand its consulting capabilities by acquiring *en masse* one of Consultco's consulting units, consisting of some 180 people. These people were added to the existing ASD workforce of 1500. The acquisition was spearheaded by group president John Duke, a former partner of one of the 'Big 5' accounting/consulting companies (now, the 'Big 4' after the failure of Arthur Andersen) who was hired in 2001 to head up the global services area for Systech. Duke's vision was to transform the more hardware and systems engineering 'products' strategy of ASD into a high end 'consulting services' business model.

Following the traditional 'Big 5/4' model, he envisioned a business operating model wherein highly compensated principals 'owned' different client agencies and were responsible for profit and loss and all products, services and ASD employees associated with that organization. In this model,

most of the actual client work is done by lower paid and more junior consultants, thereby achieving significant leverage and profitability for the services provided under the auspices of the senior principal. This also creates a steep hierarchy where the incentives are to become a senior partner as quickly as possible. This was different from the traditional Systech operating model, wherein business development and sales managers were responsible for bidding on and 'selling' contracts which were then fulfilled through different functionally organized, operational business units. There were also customer relationship executives who were, in essence, account managers to help coordinate different interfaces, while ensuring service and delivery to the client agency. Duke's 'principal-led' business model would dramatically alter the relatively balanced power of the business development, customer relationship executives and business unit managers in favor of 'principals' (most of whom would come from the ranks of the newly acquired Consultco employees), change the delivery operations of ASD, and impact the traditional culture(s) of ASD and Systech by placing greater emphasis on leveraging and profitability over technical depth and product/service development. It also would tend to alter the traditional distribution of power, status and respect within ASD that was based on technical expertise and distributed across multiple functional areas, toward a much steeper and narrower distribution of status, respect and rewards in favor of principals.

The actors involved

To initiate the new principal-led business model, a 5-hour meeting of the top executives of ASD was set up so that 'issues could be worked through and agreements reached.' The meeting would be chaired by Sam Klein, the president of ASD, who reported to group president Duke. Attending the meeting would be president Klein's direct reports, Lance Collins, Steve Grant, John Marshall, Ron Hogan, Cal Ramsey and Mark Flowers (see Table 2 for their roles and tenure with Systech).

Two days before the meeting an experienced external consultant, Bill Marsh, was asked to facilitate the meeting to help ensure that it was as productive as possible because the general expectation of everyone was that it would be a highly contentious and unproductive session. In preparation for the session, Mark Flowers provided further background information about the situation and the participants and also commented that 'It had been decided that John Duke would not attend the meeting for two reasons. First, because of his domineering personal style and second to insure that president Klein and his team would accept and implement the new model on their own.' In addition, it was thought that a new member of the ASD team,

Table 2   Systech actors in an episode of negotiated order

Who	Role	Experience
Sam Klein	President, ASD	23 years with Systech
Lance Collins	Senior Vice President, Business Development and Sales	30 years with Systech
Steve Grant	Senior Vice President and Managing Principal	Former senior partner for the newly acquired Consultco unit
John Marshall	Vice President of Operations	22 years with Systech
Ron Hogan	Vice President of Sales	15 years with Systech
Cal Ramsey	Vice President of Business Development	12 years with Systech
Mark Flowers	Vice President of Human Resources	21 years with Systech
Bill Marsh	Facilitator	First engagement with Systech

Steve Grant, who had headed the recently acquired Consultco consulting unit, would be able to fully describe the 'principal-led' business model.

Outline of the situation

In essence, then, the recently hired group president John Duke was seeking to impose a new structure and culture on the ASD of Systech based on a management consulting business model. The ASD's leadership team, however, consisted mostly of Systech veterans who were used to a product/services and technical expertise business model and associated organizational culture. The only exception was Steve Grant who had joined the team only a few months earlier after John Duke acquired one of the consulting units of the Consultco company. ASD president Klein was under orders from Duke to implement the new, 'principal-led', business model even though he and the other members of the team were openly skeptical about it. As one member of the team commented privately, 'Didn't we just buy Consultco? If the consulting model is so good and our model so bad, how come we bought them? We should be calling the shots.'

The showdown and implicit negotiation

President Klein opened the meeting by introducing the facilitator and stating that 'the purpose of the meeting was to discuss how to take ASD forward' and that 'first and foremost we have to remember that the customer's first!' There was no mention of the new principal-led business model. Different participants then offered comments about what had to be addressed with

most agreeing that 'motivation and morale was so low we could start losing people'. After about 30 minutes the facilitator interjected that he thought morale was an important topic, 'but wasn't the purpose of the meeting to address the new business model?' President Klein said nothing, but Steve Grant began to explain the proposed principal-led business model. Almost simultaneously, Lance Collins said that Systech 'couldn't have a principal-led model because it was a publicly held company not a partnership'. Both Grant and Collins continued to give virtually simultaneous 'speeches' for a few minutes before the facilitator stopped the interaction and summarized the points each was making as a way to document the different considerations as well as to invite more listening and understanding.

The pattern of virtually simultaneous speeches, for and against aspects of the principal-led model, given by Grant and Collins and then summarized by the facilitator, continued for another 30 minutes or so with the other participants, including president Klein, mostly quiet or asking a few clarifying questions. It was clear that both men were used to being the center of attention and having their own way. The breakthrough in the meeting came when Steve Grant in a conciliatory voice acknowledged to Lance Collins that, 'Yes, things were different in Systech than in Consultco and maybe some responsibilities needed to be shared'. Lance Collins quickly remarked, 'You're right', and began to discuss how things could be shared. The others now joined in with a burst of team productivity and relatively quickly developed an entirely new option where a matrixed 'Integrated Strategy Team' for a client agency would be convened by a principal and include the relevant business development, customer relations, and business unit managers, who would continue to report within their own organizational units. This integrative business model, as several of the team members remarked, 'seemed to capture the best of both the new and the old ways of operating'.

Naming the new business model: Should it be 'principal-led'?

The participants were pleased and surprised at their agreement and ability to work together on developing the Integrated Strategy Team model. At this point, Mark Flowers wondered if the model could just be called 'the business model' and the term 'principal-led' dropped entirely 'because it would be unnecessarily provocative'. This sparked some discussion that came to a halt when president Klein said 'John Duke expects it to be called "principal-led" and he would not be happy if it was called something else.' This generated considerable push-back from all the other participants, including Steve Grant, who said 'the model we just agreed on was one of shared responsibility and that saying it was principal-led would be misleading'. The meeting adjourned with general agreement that the new way of working should be called the

Table 3   Sequence of events: From contest to collaboration to possible confrontation

Contest	Transition point	Collaboration	Confrontation/coda
Group president Duke, a newcomer from a 'Big 5/4' consulting company orders ASD president Klein to implement a new 'principal-led' business model	Grant acknowledges to Collins that: 'Yes, things are different in Systech than in Consultco and maybe some responsibilities should be shared'	Total team develops an integrative business model combining features from the current and proposed 'principal-led' business models	Group president Duke via ASD president Klein reintroduces 'principal-led' in name of ASD business model
Debate between Grant, a newcomer from Consultco, and Collins, a 30-year Systech veteran, over existing and new models	Collins quickly agrees, providing a bridge between the two groups and leading to a burst of productive energy by the participants	Grant, the newcomer asked to summarize the meeting	Re-introduction of 'principal-led' leads to uncertainty as to whether Duke indeed accepts the substance of the integrative model
Other meeting participants quiet		The name 'principal-led' is intentionally dropped as too controversial and no longer accurately representing the adopted model	

'ASD Business Model.' It was proposed by Lance Collins and agreed to by all that Steve Grant should be the one responsible for writing up a summary of the ideas, concepts and agreements from the meeting, coordinating with Lance Collins as needed.

A week later when president Klein's office distributed the summary report after clearing it with John Duke the title read 'The ASD Business Model (Principal-Led).' Naturally, this caused uncertainty whether or not Duke had indeed accepted the substance of the integrative model proposed. A summary of the flow of events is provided in Table 3.

Analysis and discussion

If we examine the Systech episode from the prism of organizational discourse as situated symbolic action we can consider the three key frames of analysis: discourse as action, discourse as situated action and discourse as symbolic

action. Each of these frames adds a further layer to a more holistic under-standing of what went on in the meeting, beyond the simple denotational or semantic level of discourse. They are analytically distinct, but inseparable in practice. Although these layers are presented sequentially, they provide a nested, complementary and additive analysis of successively increasing complexity, in which each subsequent level assumes and encompasses the previous one.

The raw material for this analysis is based on the detailed field notes taken before, during and after the episode; and is also informed by the knowledge of the interactional and organizational context acquired through the intervention experience. Our analysis can be described as a meso-discourse approach (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000), in which the researcher is sensitive to both language use and its context, interested in exploring linkages between the micro-level of interaction in distinct episodes, with features of the organizational context.

Discourse as action

At the level of locutionary speech acts, we might note the indirect intro-duction of the meeting by president Klein, not mentioning its purpose, and posing 'customers first' as a superordinate goal. In terms of illocutionary intent, president Klein, in this case, may have been intending to start off the meeting smoothly and to seek and encourage unity, bearing in mind the divergent positions and political stakes at the meeting. The relative silence by president Klein for the remainder of the meeting is also open to a range of interpretations, ranging from pre-existing intentions to give others a chance to own the issues, a desire to avoid conflict or confrontation or even passive resistance to the new business model initiated by group president Duke.

At the locutionary level, the group started the meeting by engaging in a discussion of declining motivation and morale for around half an hour, which had to be re-directed by the facilitator toward the stated purpose of the meeting, to discuss the potential implementation of a 'principal-led' business model. At the illocutionary level, the engagement by all participants in this discussion of declining motivation and morale could again be seen as an attempt at group unity and/or avoidance of the underlying conflict in the group.

Both the style (full 'broadcast' mode) and substance of the remarks by Grant and Collins, in addition, could be seen as argumentative rhetorical ploys to advance or achieve their positions. Their illocutionary intents could have been to demonstrate to each other and their audience their severe

conviction that their positions were the right thing for the organization. A contextual analysis as we see later, however, raises the likelihood that this interpretation may be at best partly valid, given the high political stakes of the meeting.

Grant's comment that things were different in Systech and perhaps some responsibilities needed to be shared (locutionary level), indicated at the illocutionary level a desire for conciliation, which was enthusiastically responded to by all participants (perlocutionary level), who grasped the opportunity and indicated their willingness to actively participate in the discussion once again.

This level of analysis of discourse as action thus focuses primarily on who said what (locutionary speech act), what they intended to achieve (illocutionary speech act) and what effects these actions had on the audience (perlocutionary level). However, a fuller understanding of the illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of speech acts in particular needs to be informed by a contextual analysis (discourse as *situated* action) as well as by a symbolic analysis (discourse as *symbolic* action).

Discourse as situated action (action and context)

In viewing discourse as situated action we must add several frames of context to more fully understand the actors' discourse, its intentions and its effects. In addition to the interactional context (what took place in the meeting and in what sequence), we have to add the organizational context and the broader industry context. The meeting was mandated by group president Duke to initiate a partner-led business model. Duke came from one of the 'Big 5/4' accounting companies and had joined Systech less than two years ago. Duke had initiated the acquisition of the Consultco unit. Steve Grant had been the senior partner of the Consultco unit before it was acquired by Systech. Duke intended to change the Systech ASD's operating model and culture in line with his previous experience in a major accounting firm.

Understanding this context helps to shed light on Duke's absence from the meeting. On the one hand, he wanted the group to arrive at the 'principal-led' business model 'voluntarily', on the other hand, he knew that if he was at the meeting, there could be no real debate of the issues because everyone knew where he stood. His reputation for inflexibility would not have helped. Grant was, therefore, Duke's champion or implicit representative at the meeting. Lance Collins had 30 years' experience at Systech and as head of business development and sales had the most to lose in political terms with a change to a principal-led model, which may be why he assumed the role of champion in contesting the new business model.

President Klein was a 23-year Systech employee charged with implementing this new business model once it had been 'accepted' by the relevant actors. Klein faced incompatible and conflicting pressures; his boss wanted him to implement an operating model that neither he, nor most of his subordinates supported. However, he had no choice, given his boss's determination and conviction that this was the right way to go. Understanding the organizational context of Klein's position can shed light on the nature of his discursive actions at the meeting, in particular, his indirect introduction to the meeting and his subsequent silence, or discursive inaction, which given the context, becomes more understandable.

In this context, it was hard to ignore the irony that the relatively small, newly acquired, 'failed' Consultco unit (represented at the meeting by Grant) was now positioned by group president Duke to tell the much larger acquiring Systech ASD how to do business. This was an irony not lost on participants, as private comments to the facilitator confirmed. Perhaps Grant was aware of the irony himself, as well as the strong likelihood that unless buy-in was achieved by the rest of the participants, implementation of a 'principal-led' model superficially accepted but deeply opposed would be in peril. Understanding this context sheds light on Grant's motivations for the pivotal discursive moment in the meeting, his conciliatory remark. The conflicting pressures within which other participants found themselves, shed light on their own motivations for grasping the conciliatory opportunity and working toward a commonly acceptable organizational model.

Discourse as situated symbolic action (action, context and symbolism)

Finally, in viewing discourse as situated symbolic action, we must go beyond the meanings of words in context, and search for deeper symbolic meanings and discursive constructions that can shed light on what is observed and its context. In this case, the meeting ultimately involved issues of power, change and adaptation; that is, a power struggle between oldtimers and newcomers over the appropriate operating structure and culture of Systech. The discursive exchanges at the meeting can be viewed as a dramatic 'showdown' between the proposed new operating model, culture and power arrangements against the established ones at Systech ASD. The label 'principal-led', in addition, was not simply a way to describe a certain operational model; it represented both a radical change in the existing order of things, as well as the contest between oldtimers and newcomers, with the newcomers seeming poised to win given their support from the very top of the organization.

The initial discussion in the ASD team about low motivation and

morale could be interpreted as an unconscious projection or an indirect means of expressing their own skeptical feelings and low morale about group president Duke's intentions. Grant and Collins can be seen as symbolic champions of each camp engaged in combat over power, prestige, respect and validation, in addition to the business future of ASD. After initial tests of strength, Grant's concession that 'Yes, things were different in Systech than in Consultco and maybe some responsibilities needed to be shared,' was a pivotal moment. That comment may have simultaneously signaled a willingness to compromise and an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the established ASD culture and its managers. In the context, it is important to note that it was the newly acquired Grant representing the new business model who made the initial conciliatory remark. This was quickly reciprocated by Collins and an understanding of how to share power in an integrated model containing aspects of both the old and the new models was reached.

Thus, at a symbolic level, the participants worked out their relative power positions in ASD and the framework for how to integrate or blend the old and the new. Group president Duke, however, who was not part of the symbolic negotiation, would not necessarily agree with the negotiated outcome. Duke's absence may have allowed the agreement to be reached, but not necessarily carried out, at least in name.

At the level of the symbolism of words, the label 'principal-led' was a focus of debate, not only because it would influence existing power arrangements by symbolizing who would have the power to control the sales and delivery process, but because it summed up and evoked in a single word the entire contest between oldtimers and newcomers over the future business model and culture of ASD, including all the associated thoughts and feelings of the involved participants. This illustrates the power of discursive labels to influence interpretation, action and thus social reality. The latter re-introduction of '(principal-led)' into the title of the meeting report suggests that further negotiations with Duke may be needed to see if the substance of the new integrated model is, indeed, acceptable. Because Duke is characterized as insistent and not flexible, it might be likely that further attempts at 'negotiating' relative power and change in ASD will be done symbolically and indirectly, or perhaps, not at all. Table 4 presents an outline of the earlier discussion.

Conclusions and implications

In terms of organizational discourse, our analysis confirms the well-accepted insights that discourse cannot be adequately understood and interpreted in

Table 4   Outline of discourse as situated symbolic action in Systech episode

Context	Discursive actions	Symbolism
New group president hired from a Big 5/4 consulting firm	ASD president introduces meeting without mention of business model, and posing customers as superordinate goal	Attempt by ASD president to encourage group unity and avoid conflict
Group president seeks to impose new, 'principal-led' business model based on professional services consulting model	Participants initially talk about low motivation and morale	Struggle between oldtimers and newcomers over future of Systech ASD
Group president buys part of Consultco firm	Debate between two individuals over 'principal-led' versus existing business model	Fight between two leading representatives of each 'side' to see who will win
Meeting of Advanced Services Division (ASD) without group president to discuss new business model	Acknowledgement by newcomer that current model has value and new model may need to be modified	Newcomer representative 'yields' by acknowledging the legitimacy of the old-timers and their ways of doing business
Existing ASD president and top team skeptical about new model and new group president	Total team creates new, integrated model to be called 'The ASD Business Model'	With the contest over status, legitimacy and future directions settled, the total team is free to 'integrate' the old and the new in a new collaborative model
President of ASD under pressure from group president to change and from his team to resist	Newcomer asked to summarize meeting	Newcomer is asked to write up summary as a sign of trust and acceptance
	Announcement one week later by president's office of 'The ASD Business Model (Principal-Led)'	Despite team agreements within ASD, the new group president is still calling the shots and cannot be ignored. His power is acknowledged by the ASD president who unilaterally inserts ('principal-led') in the name of the new business model

the absence of contextual knowledge; and that linguistic labels are more than just names, having the power, through their symbolic connotations to influence individuals' interpretations and actions and thus social reality. Beyond that, however, conceptualizing and analyzing discourse as situated symbolic action has a number of significant, interrelated implications. Specifically, it can help to respond to some of the key challenges facing the field of organizational discourse analysis in terms of providing a contextually sensitive approach to understanding organizational discourse, that is neither too narrow as to be unsuited to the organizational level of analysis, nor too broad as to entail lax conceptualizations and debatable reasoning; supplying a framework by which discourse can be empirically analyzed in a structured, but also holistic and additive manner, involving progressive levels of complexity and appreciation; and lastly demonstrating that organizational discourse analysis can have relevant, pragmatic implications that can help to narrow the gap between scholarly research and the concerns of organizational actors.

One key criticism of organizational discourse has been its lack of clarity with regard to the parameters of the field and in the specification or definition of the concept of discourse itself; in consequence leading to challenges to the theoretical value of discourse analysis (Grant et al., 2001; Keenoy et al., 1997). As van Dijk (1997: 1) notes, 'the notion of discourse is essentially fuzzy' and can involve various dimensions including language use, communication of beliefs, or social interaction. This fuzziness and difficulty of specifying the discourse concept relates to the rich antecedents of the field and to the variety of influences that bear upon it. This richness and diversity is a potential strength in terms of providing a treasury of ideas and frameworks from which organizational discourse researchers can draw. On the other hand, Alvesson and Karreman (2000: 1128) note the problem of lax conceptualization of the discourse concept: 'we cannot help sometimes feeling that the word discourse is used to cover up muddled thinking . . . Discourse sometimes comes close to standing for everything, and thus nothing'. The dilemma then becomes, how can researchers make the most of organizational discourse's rich conceptual antecedents, without falling into the trap of insufficient specification and lax conceptualization?

Paradoxically, a related issue is the existence of approaches that have a narrow, often exclusive focus on the text itself, and are thus unsuited or unwilling to more fully address and encompass contextual aspects within which texts circulate. Examples include ethnomethodological conversation analysis (Atkinson, 1988) or linguistic approaches focusing on such issues as intonation or grammatical cohesion (see, for example, Couper-Kuhlen, 2003; Martin, 2003) and whose concerns tend to stop at the sentence rather than

the level of whole texts or collections of texts within broader discourses. Such perspectives are perfectly legitimate given their specified tasks, but (at least in their conventional forms) are unsuited to organizational discourse analysis where an adequate understanding of the text must be informed by an understanding of various levels of context. The post-modernist idea of unlimited interpretations and indeterminacy of meaning is indeed questioned by the potential of employing an understanding of context as a means to develop more grounded interpretations of textual materials (Eco, 1990; Giddens, 1987).

Our conceptualization of discourse can potentially contribute to addressing the challenge of avoiding both the Scylla of lax conceptualization and insufficient specification on the one hand, as well as the Charybdis of too narrow conceptions on the other hand. Conceptualizing discourse as situated symbolic action provides a perspective that takes advantage of the rich theoretical antecedents of the concept of discourse, but at the same time is sufficiently structured and empirically applicable to organizational contexts. This perspective can potentially supply researchers in organizational discourse with a further framework with which to theoretically ground the concept of discourse and with a contextually sensitive approach to conducting empirical discourse analyses. Viewing discourse as situated symbolic action can thus help to address a further key challenge to organizational discourse, the development of discursive methodologies that are applicable to the organizational level; and that go beyond the text to address the linkages between text and context (Hardy, 2001; Keenoy et al., 1997), as well as the symbolic and constructive aspects of discourse.

In this connection, our view of discourse proposes three interrelated analytical levels relating to discursive action, situation and symbolism. Although these layers are presented sequentially, they provide a nested, complementary and additive analysis of successively increasing complexity. Each subsequent level assumes and encompasses the previous one, both logically and empirically. For example, viewing discourse as situated symbolic action logically assumes that specific communicative actions are taking place, that a knowledge of several frames of context is employed by actors, and can be explored by organizational discourse researchers to interpret these discursive actions and to further validate their own understanding of context; and that deeper symbolic meanings that relate to the very substance of language as integral to the social construction of reality are inherent in this process.

If we had used solely speech act theory to analyze the Systech episode, for example, we would have developed a good idea of *what* was said, of the different types of speech acts used by the actors and some idea of their

intentions. However, we would not have been able to more fully appreciate *why* they said what they did, why they at times kept silent, or how pivotal moments in the episode evolved, such as when all participants grasped the opportunity to jointly construct a more broadly acceptable organizational model. In order to more fully appreciate such issues, we would need to employ a deeper understanding of relevant aspects of the group, organizational and industry contexts, and how these nested levels of context related to communicative interactions at the meeting. For example, president Klein's discursive action of indirectly presenting the meeting without mentioning its purpose and posing client satisfaction as a superordinate goal, could be illuminated through a knowledge of organizational context; in particular, a knowledge of the high political stakes in the meeting, the latent conflict relating to the proposed principal-led model, and the group president's desire to have this model implemented against the wishes of most employees of that division.

Further, even by understanding communicative interactions and their context, we still would not have been able to more fully appreciate agents' intentions and interpretations and the constructive role of discourse unless we employed a symbolic lens. In the Systech episode, for example, why was the label 'principal-led' such an emotionally loaded as well as fervently resisted term? This label can be understood symbolically, not simply as a way to 'rationally' describe a potential operating model widely used in the industry and supported by the group president, but as encompassing a radically new organizational order for this Systech division, involving significant shifts in power arrangements and fostering a tenacious contest between opposing camps. Each subsequent analytical level of discourse thus contributes an additive lens to the analysis with a view to reaching more in-depth understandings of the discourse and social context under investigation.

A further criticism of organizational discourse is that it is too abstract, an 'intellectual self-indulgence with no practical payoff' (Grant et al., 2001: 10). This criticism is related to a broader issue of relevance in organization theory, the often discussed disconnect between what we study as academics and the concerns of organizational actors (Kerr, 2004). Our perspective on discourse, and the analysis based on it, help to illustrate that organizational discourse can be compatible and complementary with more applied approaches to social science (such as action research in our case), and can produce actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1996). In our case, employing this perspective enabled the facilitator to help the group move beyond internal divisive conflict over a proposed organizational arrangement to the joint crafting of a more broadly acceptable one.

Adopting a situated symbolic action perspective thus supports an

integrative, as well as practically oriented, approach to research consistent with applied methodologies such as action research. Lewin (1947) intended action research to help address the inherent limitations of studying complex social events in a laboratory as well as the artificiality of separating out single behavioral elements from an integrated system (Foster, 1972). He advocated the study of social dynamics 'not by transforming them into quantifiable units of physical actions and reactions, but by studying the intersubjectively valid sets of meanings, norms and values that are the immediate determinates of behavior' (Peters & Robinson, 1984: 115). In postulating that discursive events have integrated and contextualized literal and symbolic components, a discourse as situated symbolic action perspective is supportive of the action research orientation by inviting a more holistic consideration of social phenomena. Taking the constructive tenets of the organizational discourse field seriously, that talk is itself action and that it is also the raw material of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Oswick et al., 1997; Searle, 1995) entails and calls for a more discourse-sensitive, holistic approach to organizational research (Marshak et al., 2000). Our perspective on discourse can provide a dual applied and theoretical orientation to help both managers and organization development practitioners support a more reflexive stance as to the context and meaning of unfolding events, go beyond the literal aspects of talk and interaction, more fully appreciate the symbolic aspects in particular organizational contexts, and develop more in-depth understandings of the situation and more appropriate interventions. We offer our view of discourse as situated symbolic action as a potential contribution to this endeavor, thus helping to address a further lacuna in the field of organizational discourse, the 'challenge to incorporate the insights of discourse analysis into diagnostic and intervention strategies' (Marshak et al., 2000: 246).

In conclusion, our view of discourse as situated symbolic action is offered as an additional perspective or lens in the emerging field of organizational discourse. We hope that this perspective can help organizational actors, who have to make decisions in real time and in complex, shifting settings, 'read' organizational talk and action in a manner that goes beyond what is literally said, in a contextually sensitive, symbolic way, and thus improve their ability to take responsive actions. We also hope that this approach will contribute to sustaining the field's vibrancy and promise and at the same time help it address some of its fundamental challenges. Lastly, we hope that this perspective will encourage more research that combines a scholarly orientation with applied concerns, as well as more holistic discursive studies of organizational phenomena.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   We use the term 'discourse' to mean collections of texts, whether oral or written, located within social and organizational contexts, that share certain structural features and have both functional and constructive effects on their contexts. We see language as the raw material of discourse, and individual texts as manifestations of broader discourses (Heracleous, 2004; Heracleous & Hendry, 2000). This is a broad-level perspective amenable to various interpretations, and we offer one such interpretation of discourse as situated symbolic action in this article.

2   Having said that, semiotics as a field has moved beyond a circumscribed, linguistically oriented view of context to encompass such aspects as shared knowledge, interrelationships among actors, or broader ideologies that shape textual meanings (see, for example, Hodge & Kress, 1988, chapter 3 on 'Context as meaning: the semiosic dimension').

3   S (setting, scene); P (participants); E (ends); A (act sequence); K (key); I (instrumentalities); N (norms of interaction and interpretation); G (genre).

4   The names of the company and all individuals have been disguised.

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