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Four Propositions toward an Interpretive Theory of the Process of Discursive Reality Construction

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Over the last decade the field of organizational discourse has developed from being a nascent, unstructured, and emergent field toward maturity, characterized by established specialist conferences, creation of research centers, publishing of special issues in leading journals, and a vibrant international community of scholars contributing to this field. Various definitions of discourse have been adopted, influenced by the paradigmatic standpoint and research goals of their authors (see, for example, Grant et al. 2004; Heracleous 2006a; Phillips and Hardy 2002). In this chapter I define discourses as collections of texts, both verbal and textual, that are patterned and underlied by certain structural features that lend both coherence (at the structural level) as well as patterned variation (at the communicative level) to them. Language is the raw material that constitutes texts, collections of which in turn constitute discourses that exist in a mutually constitutive relationship with actors' interpretations and actions (Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Heracleous and Hendry 2000).

The view that discourse does not merely function as a conduit for the transfer of communicative messages, in a merely representative, functional fashion, but is constructive of social and organizational reality is an accepted assumption of a wide spectrum of theoretical fields. Social constructionism, for example, holds that individuals, through social interaction, construct "semantic fields" or "zones of meaning" within which they conduct their daily affairs (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 55). Rhetorical studies, in addition, aim to uncover how speeches or texts gain persuasive force that can shift audiences' or readers' perceptions of reality on pressing social issues (Gill and Whedbee 1997; Charland 1987; Gronbeck 1973). Critical theory and critical discourse analysis focus on unmasking what they see as the surreptitious effects of

discourse in constructing particular subject identities and particular versions of the “truth” that skew power relations in the interests of the already powerful, with the explicit aim of delegitimizing these constructions and inducing social change (van Dijk 1993; Mumby and Stohl 1991).

Indeed, one of the key contributions of organizational discourse to organization theory is to argue for, and aid a deeper, more nuanced understanding of, the social construction of reality (Grant, Keenoy, and Oswick 2001). As organizational communication theorists have argued, organization and communication are co-constitutive, conversations are sites of organizing processes, and texts are reflections of sense making and interpretive processes within particular communities of practice (Taylor and Robichaud 2004; Taylor and Van Every 2000). Despite the widespread acceptance of the constructive role of discourse (Hardy 2001), however, discussions of discourse more broadly, and understandings of the process of discursive reality construction more specifically, remain unclear (Chia 2000) and fragmented (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000). In this chapter I draw from speech act theory, rhetoric, ethnography of communication, social constructionism, social cognition, symbolic interactionism, and critical discourse analysis to advance four propositions toward an interpretive theory intended to aid further understanding of the process of discursive construction of reality within an integrative framework.

Responding to its complex nature and to the multidisciplinary antecedents of discourse (Grant, Keenoy, and Oswick 2001; Heracleous 2004, 2006a; Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant 2000), and following Ashby’s (1960) notion of requisite variety, the four propositions build on a broad array of theoretical domains that are not thoroughly distinct but overlapping in their aims and concerns. As used here, these domains share key tenets of the interpretive paradigm (Burrell and Morgan 1979).¹ The four propositions can help to address the research challenge of improving the clarity of theoretical exposition in the field of organizational discourse, addressing interrelated levels of analysis, and potentially leading to more cumulative and integrative research in this field.

THE FOUR PROPOSITIONS

The four propositions are:

1. Discourse can fruitfully be seen as situated symbolic action
2. Discourse and cognition are mutually constituted
3. Social reality is constructed through discursive symbolic interaction
4. Discursive reality construction is hegemonic, biased in favor of dominant interests

Proposition 1 relates to the ontology of discourse. It underlies and informs the other three propositions and is located at a metatheoretical level. Proposition 2 outlines the basic assumption on the relationship of discourse to agents' thinking, which in turn can diffuse and become institutionalized through discursive symbolic interaction (proposition 3). Proposition 4 introduces the elemental dimension of power, in effect helping to explain why understanding the relationship between discourse and social reality construction is a worthwhile endeavor. Taken together, these propositions shed light on the process of discursive reality construction.

Proposition 1: Discourse Can Fruitfully Be Seen as Situated Symbolic Action

The three components of this proposition (situated nature; symbolic nature; and action dimension), function at multiple levels of analysis. Situational contexts, for example, are nested within broader organizational and institutional contexts. Viewing discourse as action, moreover, is a valid perspective at the micro, meso, and institutional levels. At the micro level of individual action, for example, analysis can examine an actor's employment of specific communicative actions with intent to achieve certain goals. Communicative actions also occur within social interaction, where meso-level analysis can examine other agents' interpretations of intended meanings based on their own understandings and concerns and the interplay of communicative actions within groups and organizations. Lastly, (communicative) actions can be seen as substantive manifestations as well as constitutive elements of institutional structures (Giddens 1984; Searle 1995), including discursive deep structures (Heracleous 2006b; Heracleous and Barrett 2001). Thus, analysis of macro-level institutional arrangements and institutionalized meanings can be informed by examination of communicative actions and agents' first-order meanings (Searle 1995; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). Below I discuss in more detail the three dimensions of the view of discourse as situated symbolic action, in each case drawing from relevant theoretical antecedents.

Discourse as action (proposition 1a²). Speech act theory (Austin 1962) helped to propel language from the domain of communication to the domain of action by challenging the traditional assumption of the philosophy of language, that "to say something . . . is always and simply to *state* something" that has truth value, suggesting instead that "to *say* something is to *do* something" (1962, 12, emphases in original). Austin (1962) distinguished among the act of saying something (locutionary act), the intent in saying something (illocutionary act), and the effects of acts on the audience (perlocutionary acts). He referred to utterances that do things as "performatives" (1962, 6)

and the contextual circumstances that could hinder this performance “infelicities” (1962, 14). Searle (1975) developed more elaborate typologies of illocutionary acts, specified further their felicity conditions, and introduced the notion of indirect speech acts in which the link between intended meaning and utterance is unclear.

Despite the foundational nature of speech act theory in offering a conception of language as action, the focus is on the micro-level utterances, a level not naturally suited to the analysis of broader collections of texts (which constitute discourses). In order to understand “macro” speech acts (van Dijk 1977), or the effects at the action level of “grand” or “mega” discourses (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000), another approach is needed that can engage with these levels, such as rhetorical analysis.

There are a variety of definitions of rhetoric, but most definitions view rhetoric as discourse that attempts to persuade and move individuals to action, emphasizing its instrumental and pragmatic concerns. In Suddaby and Greenwood’s words, “persuasive language, or rhetorical strategy, is a significant tool by which shifts in a dominant logic can be achieved” (2005, 41). In terms of classical rhetoric, persuasive power could be achieved through *ethos*, or the character of the speaker; appeal to *pathos*, or emotion, and finally through *logos* or logical argument (Aristotle 1991). Burke’s (1969) work introduced, in addition to persuasion, the concept of identification between rhetor and audience as a key rhetorical process. Rhetoric thus allows a holistic exploration of situation, audience, rhetor, and textual features such as structure and temporality, enthymemes, metaphor, and iconicity to shed light on how discourse can influence actors’ understandings, values, and beliefs by espousing particular views of the world (Gill and Whedbee 1997).

The classical rhetorical situation tends to focus on a single orator, a single text such as a speech delivered at a certain point to a largely homogeneous audience, with emphasis on rhetorical techniques and with the aim of persuading the audience, usually within a political context. Contemporary rhetorical analyses have shifted away from this traditional situation and mode of analysis to a more pluralist, constructive (rather than functional) approach that encompasses texts from a group of actors (for example, a stakeholder group or an organization, rather than an individual rhetor), and groups of texts (discourses) as opposed to individual texts such as single speeches. These texts may occur at multiple points, in a variety of contexts, and may be addressed to and produced by heterogeneous audiences (a variety of stakeholders with potentially incompatible interests). Analyses here tend to examine structural properties of such collections of texts, aiming to gain insights in their role in processes of social construction. Examples of empirical applications of rhetorical analysis to societal or organizational discourses with structural level,

constructive concerns include Charland (1987), Gronbeck (1973), Heracleous (2006b), Heracleous and Barrett (2001), and Suddaby and Greenwood (2005).

Discourse as situated action (proposition 1b). The linkage between text and context is important to a number of fields, including rhetoric, ethnography of communication, critical discourse analysis, discourse pragmatics, and frame analysis. We draw in this section further from rhetoric and from the field of ethnography of communication to draw attention to the situational elements of discourse, which influence both the generation and interpretation of discourse.

Further to the discussion above, rhetoric aims to explore the “dynamic interaction of a rhetorical text with its context” (Gill and Whedbee 1997, 159). The important influence of the context or situation on what should and could be said, as well as the rhetor’s competence, were highlighted by Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as “an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion” (1991, 36). This definition illustrates the goal-directed and contextual orientation of this field, as does Bryant’s (1974, 211) view that “the rhetorical function is the function of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas.” Bitzer (1968) argued that beyond being a necessary condition of rhetorical discourse, the situation offers exigencies that both shape and are addressed by rhetorical discourse. There is thus a mutually constitutive relationship between rhetorical discourse and the situation.

Ethnographic studies of communication (Hymes 1964) have shown that communication cannot be adequately understood as distinct from its context. Frake (1964), for example, has shown how discourse is divided in distinct stages in the “drinking talk” of the Eastern Subanun tribe in the Philippines, where each discourse stage accomplishes different speech acts and has its own logic of appropriateness. “Drinking talk” is simultaneously social interaction, entertainment, and the de facto governance institution of this social group, where leaders are determined based on their skill at “talking from the straw,” both in terms of rational as well as aesthetic discourse (1964, 132). Basso (1970), moreover, has shown that not only talk but also silence has different meanings depending on its context of use by identifying several distinct situations where silence is used by Western Apache Indians. Elements of context were synthesized in Hymes’s (1972) SPEAKING framework. This refers to S (setting, scene); P (participants); E (ends); A (act sequence); K (key); I (instrumentalities); N (norms of interaction and interpretation); and G (genre). The embeddedness of discourse in its context extends beyond the immediate situation, being 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 and Levinson 1991, 614).

Discourse as symbolic action (proposition 1c). Berger and Luckmann (1966), in their influential statement of social constructionism, suggested that individuals know social reality in terms of symbolic universes constructed through social interaction. They viewed language as the “most important sign system of human society” (1966, 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” (1966, 55), within which daily routines proceed.

Language (as the building block of texts that make up discourses) at a basic semantic level as a system of signs is symbolic, inasmuch as signs have a meaning beyond themselves. From a social construction perspective, however, through its symbolic character, discourse also evokes mental frames that are “metacommunicative” (Bateson 1972, 188), simultaneously highlighting certain meanings and excluding others. A frame can be triggered and represented by a few words or phrases (often metaphorical) that can evoke powerful emotional reactions subconsciously linked to a story line (a fuller representation of the frame) that then shape agents’ reasoning and decision making (Marshak and Heracleous 2009).

The framing process evokes particular typifications and associations through connotation as well as displaying the speakers’ attitudes and beliefs (Xu 1992). Language, in this perspective, does not simply mirror social reality through (constructed) correspondences between signs and things but constitutes it through its symbolic power, creating conditioned rationalities as widespread ways of thinking within particular social systems (Gergen and Thatchenkery 1996). Such conditioned rationalities were empirically illustrated, for example, by Heracleous and Barrett (2001) and Heracleous (2006a) through application of rhetorical analysis, represented via enthymemes that operated as structural features of the organizational discourses studied. The taken-for-granted premises of these enthymemes not only provided shared understandings but also exerted normative force, legitimizing or challenging agents’ interpretations and actions as well as organizational initiatives.

An application of the framework of discourse as situated symbolic action. Heracleous and Marshak (2004) apply the lens of discourse as situated symbolic action to analyze an episode of negotiated order, a meeting of senior managers of Systech, a major IT organization where a new business model for the organization’s advanced consulting division was debated. The recently hired group president aimed to implement a model that entailed a move from the more traditional, functionally based, distributed model of client engagement used at the division to a “principal-centered” consulting model involving principals who “owned” clients and were responsible for all aspects of

the client engagement. This move would lead to 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 co-operative, productive discussion in which a new integrative model was developed, labeled 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)” in the name, reaffirming his desire for a business model with most of the power and status accruing to principals.

This episode was analyzed firstly through a 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. For example, at the locutionary level, the meeting was opened without mention of its purpose and by referring to “customers first” as a superordinate goal. At the illocutionary level this may have been an attempt to start off the meeting smoothly and to encourage group unity in the context of deeply divergent political interests and views bubbling under the surface.

Secondly, it was analyzed through a view of discourse as *situated action*, examining the added value that arises from a knowledge of the different levels of context (interactional, organizational, and industry) in discourse analysis. For example, information about the previous career of the new group president, which was spent in a big 5/4 accounting firm and about his subsequent acquisition of part of Consultco, which was operating through this principal-led model, helps to shed light on his commitment and determination to implement this model in the face of fierce resistance by most Systech actors. Further, a knowledge of the professional background and organizational position of the participants of the meeting (for example, whether they were part of the acquired consulting firm or veterans of Systech) helps to put in context their utterances with respect to the “principal-centered” and distributed models.

Lastly, it was analyzed through a view of discourse as *situated symbolic action*, adding a sensitivity to deeper considerations of how discourse frames, constructs, and represents issues in particular ways. For example, 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; in this case between the old-timers, representing the distributed way of operating, and the newcomers, representing the principal-led way of operating. Further, the acknowledgement by the newcomer and advocate of the principal-centered model, Grant, that things were done differently in Systech and

maybe some responsibilities should be shared, was more than an acknowledgement—it was a symbolic affirmation of his acceptance of the legitimacy of the existing, distributed model and that parts of the distributed model could be integrated in the new model.

Heracleous and Marshak (2004) illustrated that each of these perspectives is both nested in the broader conception of discourse as situated symbolic action but also is additive, in terms of offering a different piece of the puzzle to understanding what went on in the episode through the analysis of discourse. The analysis illustrates how a label (“principal-centered”) means much more than its denotational content, being imbued with substantial sociopolitical connotations, and how interactions are much more than merely information transfer among parties but also symbolic statements of agentive positions. Finally, the final actions of the group president illustrate how power can not only be symbolized but also exercised through language.

Proposition 2: Discourse and Cognition Are Mutually Constituted

Our cognitive schemata are shaped and elaborated not only through the effects of our bodily, material existence (Heracleous and Jacobs 2008), but also, importantly, through discursive social interaction. At the individual level, cognition and action are interrelated (Gioia 1986; Thomas and Thomas 1970); what we believe shapes our actions, and vice versa, in a process influenced by our mental maps, our perceived interests, as well as efforts to avoid the uncomfortable effects of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1959). At the group level, shared cognitions can be seen as “social representations” (Moscovici 1981), or as the deeper aspects of culture, the values and shared assumptions of a group (Schein 2004) that are shaped by and in turn influence discursive social interaction.

Van Dijk (1993, 251) has referred to cognition as the “missing link” between discourse and action. Cognition can be operationalized in terms of the concept of “schema,” a central construct of cognitive psychology (Condor and Antaki 1997, Rumelhart 1984). A schema is “a cognitive structure that consists in part of the representation of some stimulus domain. The schema contains general knowledge about that domain, including a specification of the relationships among its attributes as well as specific examples or instances of the stimulus domain” (Taylor and Crocker 1981, 91). As Weick (1977, 277) noted, schemata are “networks of causal sequences” or “causal maps” that are in a mutually constitutive relationship with processes of enactment (see also Weick 1979).

Interpretive schemes and discourse are mutually constituted in a process of continuous interaction, where “understanding is accomplished and com-

municated mainly by means of symbols (most notably in the form of metaphorical language) that are then retained in a structured or schematic form via scripts. The scripts subsequently serve as a basis for action that further facilitates the meaning construction and sense-making processes” (Gioia 1986, 50; scripts are types of schemata). Cognitive structures are not static; they can be affirmed, elaborated, or challenged when discourse is both interpreted and produced through them (Eoyang 1983, 113), a process that in effect enables discourse to alter individual mental maps, influencing discursive social interaction, and as structuration theory (Giddens 1984) suggests, through the idea of the duality of structure, ultimately the institutionalization of meaning.

Proposition 3: Social Reality Is Constructed through Discursive Symbolic Interaction

Language, as constitutive of texts and discourse, is the primary building block of mental maps or cognitive schemata, is inherent to social interaction and enshrines meanings that over time become institutionalized, affirmed, or challenged through social interaction. According to van Dijk (1990, 165), “Social representations are largely acquired, used and changed through text and talk.” More generally, “All concepts, categories, complex representations, as well as the processes of their manipulation, are acquired and used mostly in social contexts of perception, interpretation and interaction” (van Dijk 1988, 134).

Interpretive sociology holds that discursive social interaction is central to the construction of social reality and to agents’ actions based on this reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Moscovici 1981). As Gioia (1986) observed, action arises out of interpretive schemes, and new experiences or reflections influence interpretive schemes and therefore subsequent action. This interactive view between cognition and discursive action emphasizes the relatively malleable nature of interpretive schemes, which can progressively be redefined through the addition or attrition of concepts, the transformation of perceived causal associations, or the altered salience of concepts (Eoyang 1983).

Symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) can inform further our understanding of this process. Even though its origins lie in a reaction to the dominant positivist paradigm in sociology, many of its core premises have over time been accepted in mainstream research (Fine 1993). Symbolic interactionism assumes that individual action arises out of the meanings that situations have for people (Thomas and Thomas 1970); that meanings arise through social interaction with others; and that individuals modify meanings in the process of thinking through issues and interacting further with others (Blumer 1969, 2).

Symbolic interactionism, therefore, has a dual focus on social interaction and on the meanings involved in interaction (Prasad 1993). George H. Mead,

the intellectual father of symbolic interactionism, was particularly concerned with the nature of the self, which he conceptualized as a social object arising out of a process of social interaction (Mead 1912, 1913) and primarily through “vocal gesture” or talk, suggesting that “the ‘me’ is a man’s reply to his own talk” (1912, 405). The self becomes a social object when it “assumes . . . the attitudes of generalized others” (1925, 275). For Mead, not only self but mind was also discursively constituted. When individuals talk to themselves as they talk to others, “in keeping up this conversation in the inner forum constitutes the field . . . of mind” (Mead 1922, 160).

Through discursive symbolic interaction, therefore, meanings can become institutionalized or “objectified” (Berger and Luckmann 1966), acquiring a longer-term solidity and reification. Institutionalized meanings have their discursive correlates in the form of discursive deep structures that are intertextual, persist in the long term, are constructive as opposed to merely communicative, transcend individual situations, and are implicit, residing in actors’ practical consciousness (Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Heracleous and Hendry 2000).

The linkage of discourse and cognition can enable analysts to access the ideational worlds of groups through discourse analysis and to explore the nature of the interrelations among different discourses corresponding to these ideational worlds (for example, Heracleous 2006b). Further, discourse analysis approaches aiming to understand the ideational world of groups that can be applied to other domains than language; for example, material constructions or “embodied metaphors” constructed by particular groups (Heracleous and Jacobs 2008). From an analytical perspective, embodied metaphors can help researchers gain access to social representations. From a practice perspective, the process of constructing embodied metaphors can help group members create shared understandings of situations (Jacobs and Heracleous 2006) as well as to surface and debate key features of their organizations and competitive contexts (Heracleous and Jacobs 2008).

An illustration of propositions 2 and 3. Heracleous (2006b) studied the organizational discourses operating in a human resources consulting firm and how these discourses influenced actors’ ways of thinking and acting in the context of a strategic change program. Further, the study explored how discursive deep structures were diffused and reaffirmed through social interaction and through their manifestation and operationalization in organizational processes and systems. One key finding was that discursive deep structures, such as root metaphors and enthymemes (versus surface communicative actions), are highly influential in shaping mental maps and subsequent actions, reaffirming the links among discourse, cognition, and action. These structural discursive features transcend individual texts and manifest in a variety of situ-

ations and at different times, often being taken for granted and implicit rather than explicitly stated (Heracleous and Hendry 2000).

In this organization, the dominant discourse was constituted and patterned by an enthymeme structure that posed financial success as the ultimate objective, higher sales to clients as a means to achieve this objective, and then subordinated other initiatives such as the strategic change program to the dominant discourse (in this case undertaking strategic change as a way of increasing sales to clients). The dominant discourse was an overarching structure that appropriated (or opposed) other discourses operating in this organization. For any actor advocating a course of action or an investment to be taken seriously, they had to frame their arguments in terms of the dominant discourse, in terms of the particular constructions of the central themes of this discourse as well as in terms of its vocabulary and style.

The dominant discourse also shaped how actors interpreted situations and acted based on their interpretations; for example, with respect to the various stakeholders involved in the change program. Consultants, the actors who were seen as making the highest contribution toward increasing sales, received priority in terms of the issues they raised being addressed by the change program; other stakeholders not as explicitly linked to higher sales to clients had lower priority. Other areas where discursive structures manifested included the internal consulting market and the reward and evaluation system. The importance of clients and achieving higher sales to them to reach financial success led to an active internal market, where consultants had to develop their personal networks and their personal positioning as service providers to their colleagues who sold and directed client projects so that they could be invited to participate on projects. In this context, client relationships were a source of power and were zealously developed and guarded. Finally, despite the fact that the reward and evaluation system was formally based on a variety of factors, including developmental and mentoring considerations, consultants believed, in line with the dominant discourse, that the factor that mattered most was personally meeting their sales targets (achieving higher sales to clients).

This study illustrated that discursive structures and constructions persist in the longer term and reside in actors' practical consciousness (Giddens 1984), in effect exhibiting a link between discourse and cognition. Discursive central themes and their constructions take on the properties of normative devices for orienting action, where action is itself a symbolic affirmation (or potentially a challenge) of the importance of these themes (proposition 2). Internal documents produced by consultants exhibited the discursive central themes, many consultants' conversations were structured through these themes, and consultants frequently accounted for their actions or inactions by making reference to them. Further, discursive structures and constructions (which in this case

acted as implicit premises in organizational enthymemes) were inculcated to agents through socialization processes such as interaction with other consultants, rituals such as Christmas parties, symbolic factors, and experiences in particular contexts (for example, in the internal consulting market and in consulting engagements, proposition 3).

Other illustrations of the social construction of reality (seen as creating shared understandings or shared representations, to use Moscovici's 1981 term) through discursive symbolic interaction can be found in Heracleous and Jacobs (2008) and Jacobs and Heracleous (2006). These studies illustrated how groups of managers, using the medium of construction toy materials in facilitated workshops, developed shared understandings of their organizational or task identities and work group challenges.

Figure 1.1 below illustrates the above concepts and their levels of application. This figure is not intended to be an illustration of process, but rather

Key Concepts—Levels of Application

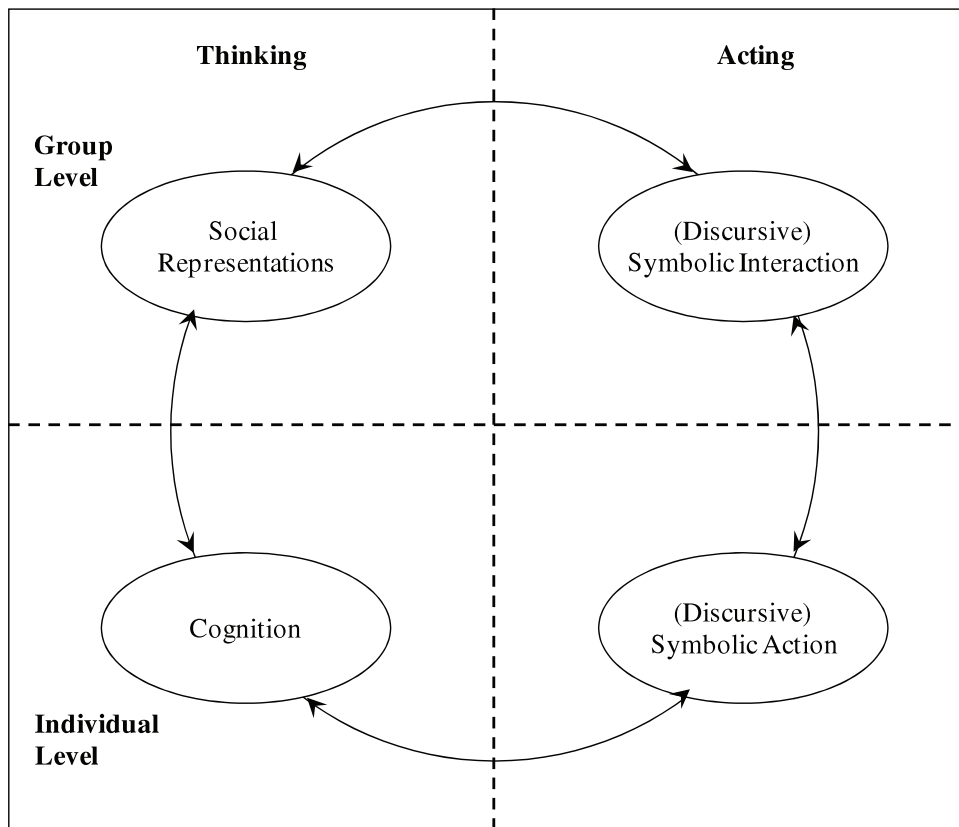


Figure 1.1. Key concepts and their level of application.

an illustration of the positioning of the concepts addressed above in terms of the theoretical levels or distinctions between individual/group and thinking/acting. It also aims to relate the concepts presented above to each other by virtue of their positioning. For example, proposition 2 refers to the mutual constitution of cognition and discourse, and these two concepts are positioned in the lower half of the figure; cognition at the bottom left and discourse at the bottom right. Proposition 3 suggests that social reality is constructed through discursive symbolic interaction. Social reality (seen as social representations) is positioned at the top left-hand side of the figure, and discursive social interaction at the top right-hand side. The view of discourse as situated symbolic action (proposition 1) is represented in the two quadrants on the right-hand side of the figure.

Proposition 4: Discursive Reality Construction Is Hegemonic

Critical discourse analysis aims to demonstrate that discourses, far from being merely representational and neutral, and beyond being constructive (or perhaps through their constructive role), mask and perpetuate unequal and unfair power relations and social practices. This is accomplished by presenting socially constructed situations as natural (the way things should be) and subtly influencing the construction of identities, roles, and “truth,” what can be discussed, how, and who has legitimacy to raise and debate issues.

As Giddens (1984) has observed, symbolic universes function not only as communicational and sensemaking mechanisms but also as legitimating ones, where power and domination are inherent elements of structural processes of social reproduction. Critical discourse analysis views discourses not as neutral or unbiased but as “sites of power” (Mumby and Stohl 1991, 316), often as entrenched “social practices” themselves (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 258) that produce particular sorts of subjectivity and identity (du Gay and Salaman 1992) in the interests of the powerful.

The theoretical antecedents of critical discourse analysis lay in social theory, in particular the work of Gramsci (1971), Althusser (1971), Foucault (1980), and others (see Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Fairclough and Wodak 1997). Foucault’s work, especially his genealogical writings (1980) focusing on the intimate links between discourse and power, have been a potent inspiration. Fairclough (1992) has offered a broad organizing framework for critical discourse analysts through his tripartite distinction of discourse as text, discourse as discursive practice, and finally discourse as social practice. The three elements move progressively from text to context and from discourse to practice.

Consistent with our earlier propositions, critical discourse analysis assumes that social realities are principally constituted through discourse, or in van Dijk's (1993, 254) words, that "managing the mind of others is essentially a function of text and talk." Discourses are thus seen as imbued with ideological hegemony, the process by which dominant classes attempt to construct and perpetuate belief systems that support their own interests and make the status quo appear commonsensical and natural (Barthes 1993; Gramsci 1971).

Critical discourse analysis is interventionist; going beyond mere analysis, it is ethically committed to unmasking the processes of domination through which discourses promote social arrangements that support and perpetuate the interests of dominant groups (Barthes 1993; Gramsci 1971; Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Wodak 1990).

In terms of methodology, critical discourse analysts use a variety of interpretively oriented discourse analysis approaches often supplemented by historical analyses, with attention to context, especially discursive and social practices and how these link with the texts under analysis. The foci of study include social problems such as racism, gender relations, ethnic tensions, or literacy, not only as an academic effort but also as a committed form of social intervention (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Fairclough and Wodak 1997; van Dijk 1993; Wodak 1990).

An illustration of the links between discourse and power. Jacobs and Heracleous (2006) used a Foucauldian "archaeological" approach (Foucault 1972), combined with "genealogical" concerns (Foucault 1980), to explore the discourse of German management accounting, or "Controlling Science" as it is referred to. Foucault's (1972) archaeological approach attempts to understand the underlying rules that structure and determine discourses, practices, and subject positions. As Burrell (1988, 229) noted, the archaeologist seeks to uncover "the same in the different"; that is, how the same rules can regulate a variety of discourses and social practices, even as they remain unknown or taken for granted to the agents involved; and suggested that in this type of analysis there is a need to bracket accepted truth so that a more historical, structural, in-depth analytical approach can be achieved.

The authors firstly examined the conceptual foundations of Controlling Science; secondly, identified functional similarities of these conceptions with Taylor's scientific management, shown to be a conceptual ancestor of Controlling Science; and thirdly argued that Panopticism was a common unifying metaphor for both Taylorism and Controlling Science. They found

that Panopticism as a disciplinary instrument and as an organizing metaphor could still be discerned in German management accounting, affecting agents' interpretations, actions, and organizational practices. The Panopticon's *raison d'être* was surveillance and control of individuals. Its very design operationalized the principle of power as both visible and unverifiable, and its presence enabled hierarchical observation and normalizing sanction. Foucault called Panopticism "a technological invention in the order of power, comparable with the steam engine in the order of production" (Foucault 1976, 71).

Jacobs and Heracleous (2006) analyzed Taylor's scientific management as a conceptual ancestor of Controlling Science and as an operationalization of the Panopticon. The task system as well as the labor office that controls individual workers' performance are in effect representations of hierarchical observation and normalizing sanction, the two cornerstones of the Panopticon. Further, from a genealogical perspective, the authors explored the nature of the Panopticon as a potent metaphor for disciplinary regimes that use hierarchical observation and normalizing sanction and showed that the Panopticon can be seen as a unifying metaphor for both Taylorism and Controlling Science. The authors showed how Panoptical processes within a consulting organization using Controlling Science led to distorted communication, selective reporting of figures, reduction of behavioral options through the assumption of being observed, and the creation of self-discipline along the lines of dominant normalizing sanctions that made the physical presence of an inspector or manager unnecessary.

As an example of critical discourse analysis, Jacobs and Heracleous's (2006) study examines a seemingly innocuous and neutral type of accounting practice, German Controlling Science, and reveals how this practice is bound up with the exercise of power through its embodiment and enablement of the cornerstones of Panopticism: hierarchical observation and normalizing sanction. Controlling Science is revealed not as a neutral record-keeping technology but as a technology of power that subjugates agents by rendering them visible to a system that is simultaneously a domain of accountability and panoptical control. The study also illustrates how agents can manipulate data and communication in order to reduce the impact of the panoptic control system, in an example of Giddens's (1984) concept of the dialectic of control, in the process making it more difficult for the organization to have valid data as a side effect of the panoptic system.

Figure 1.2 on the following page portrays the four propositions toward a theory of the process of discursive reality construction.

Four Propositions

Theoretical Propositions	Theoretical Levels	Theoretical Fields	Key Authors Drawn On	Potential Foci For Discourse Analysis
1. Discourse can fruitfully be seen as situated symbolic action	Meta-level conception	As below	As below	As below
1a. Discourse is <i>action</i> ; it not only says things, but also does things	Multi-level	Speech act theory; Rhetoric	Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975; Aristotle, 1991; Gill & Whedbee, 1997	What does a discourse intend to accomplish, or does accomplish?
1b. Discourse is <i>situated</i> action; a figure that assumes meaning in context (the ground), within a dialectical relationship	Multi-level	Rhetoric; Ethnography of communication	Hymes, 1964, 1972; Gumperz & Levinson, 1991	What can a discourse reveal about its context, or vice versa? How do they shape each other?
1c. Discourse is <i>symbolic</i> action; it conveys actors' values and beliefs, and constructs or evokes mental frames for interpreting issues	Multi-level	Social constructionism	Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996	What are the constructions conveyed by a discourse, and how are they created by texts?
2. Discourse and cognition are mutually constituted. Discourse arises from, and is interpreted through, mental maps; Mental maps are, in turn, constituted through discourse	Individual/ subjective Process Micro-level	Social cognition	Condor & Antaki, 1997; Gioia, 1986; Taylor & Crocker, 1981	How do discursive constructions shape and/or reflect mental maps? What processes are involved in this mutual constitution?
3. Social reality is constructed through discursive symbolic interaction. This is the principal means through which inter-subjective understandings are created, affirmed or challenged	Group/inter-subjective Process Meso-level	Social Cognition Symbolic interactionism	As above for social cognition Mead, 1912, 1913, 1922, 1925; Blumer, 1969	What constructions are diffused through discursive interaction, and how do they shape social reality? What are the interactive processes involved?
4. Discursive reality construction is hegemonic, biased in favor of dominant interests	Role of power and ideology Macro-level (institutional)	Social theory Critical discourse analysis	Foucault, 1980; Gramsci, 1971 Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 1993	How does discourse skew social reality in the interests of powerful groups? What interventions can be made to oppose this?

Note: An earlier version of this figure appeared in Heracleous and Marshak (2004).

Figure 1.2. Four propositions toward a theory of the process of discursive reality construction.

CONCLUSION

Even though discourse is seen as basic to the social construction of reality (Grant, Keenoy, and Oswick 2001) as well as to organizational functioning (Heracleous 2006a; Marshak et al. 2000), understanding of this process remains unclear and fragmented. As a contribution in this direction, in this chapter I suggested four propositions toward a theory of discursive reality construction.

The first proposition concerns a meta-level perspective of the nature of discourse, viewed as *situated symbolic action*. This draws from the basic insight of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1975) that discourse not only says things but also *does* things. At the same time discourse is *symbolic* in that it conveys actors' values and beliefs and constructs or evokes frames for interpreting the issues at hand, as social constructionism highlights (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Discourse is also *situated* in that discursive interaction

takes place within embedded, nested contexts that condition intended and perceived meanings and pose rules of discursive and behavioral appropriateness, as revealed by ethnographies of communication (Hymes 1964; Basso 1970; Frake 1964).

The second proposition relates to individual-level subjective processes (micro level), and draws from the field of social cognition (Condor and Antaki 1997; van Dijk 1990) to suggest that discourse and cognition are mutually constituted. The third proposition then moves to group-level intersubjective processes (meso level), drawing from social cognition and symbolic interactionism (Mead 1912, 1913; Blumer 1969) to state that social reality is constructed through (discursive) symbolic interaction. Meanings can become institutionalized and “objectified” (Berger and Luckmann 1966) through discursive symbolic interaction, which is itself patterned by deep structures of discourse linked to the ideational world of a group (Heracleous 2006b; Heracleous and Barrett 2001). The fourth proposition highlights the role of power and ideology in the functioning of discourse and its social and organizational consequences (institutional, macro level). Based on critical theory and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Foucault 1980; Gramsci 1971; van Dijk 1993), discursive reality construction is seen as hegemonic, continually biasing or manipulating social reality in the interests of powerful groups.

Figure 1.3 on the following page is a diagrammatic representation of the process of discursive reality construction. It portrays five interlinked social actors within an organizational context. Actors A and B are engaged in discursive symbolic interaction within a particular situational context (proposition 1). There is a dialectical relationship between their own cognition and (communicative) actions (proposition 2). At the same time, they are exchanging and interpreting discursive meanings through their interpretive schemes, sustaining and objectifying meanings or challenging the status quo (proposition 3). Actors A and B are linked in the same way with other actors, X, Y, and Z. For the sake of clarity of exposition, arrows have not been included from each actor to all other actors, as would be the case in a group context of discursive social interaction.

This whole process is pervaded and infused by issues of power and hegemony as they pertain to the situation, organization, and society these actors are in (proposition 4). Power is not represented pictorially in the diagram in order to highlight that it is not something visible and external to individuals, but deeply embedded in, and constitutive of, social relationships, actions, and cognitions (Foucault 1980). Lastly, actors are situated within nested contexts; the situational context is embedded within the organizational context, itself embedded within industry and broader societal contexts. These contexts are analytically distinct but practically intertwined and inseparable.

The Discursive Construction of Social Reality

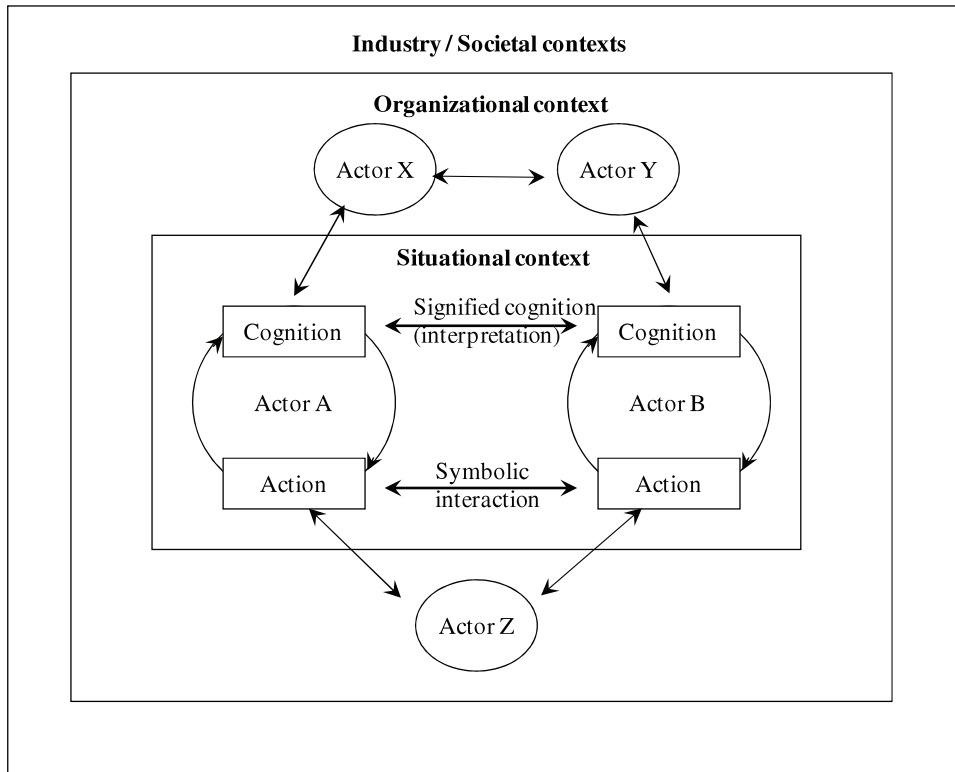


Figure 1.3. A diagrammatic representation of the discursive construction of social reality.

These four propositions can contribute toward gaining greater clarity in theoretical exposition and empirical analyses of the process of discursive reality construction, a challenge that characterizes the field of organizational discourse as a whole (Grant, Keenoy, and Oswick 2001). The four propositions offer a systematic way of addressing multiple levels of analysis; firstly, the meta level of the ontology of discourse (the nature of discourse as situated symbolic action, informing the rest of the propositions); secondly, the micro level of single texts, communicative actions, and individual communicative intent and cognition; thirdly, the meso level of discursive interaction and social construction of reality, and finally the macro level of power, social context, and institutionalized meanings.

Importantly, these levels are theoretically interrelated and can be potentially analyzed by multilevel research that collects data at multiple levels of analysis (for example, Donnellon, Gray, and Bougon 1986; Gephart 1993; Heracleous and Barrett 2001). This type of multilevel research can also help

to address important research challenges such as exploring both text and its context, or the roles and interrelations of both structure and agency (Hardy 2001). With regard to structure and agency, for example, propositions 2, 3, and 4 move progressively from an agency-centered approach to a structure-centered approach. These propositions are not offered as testable hypotheses (even though testable hypotheses could conceivably be developed to test aspects of their functioning), but rather as principles that could underlie the design of empirical research and aid the interpretation of findings, in the same vein as Giddens (1984, 326–27; 1991, 213), for example, has posed the empirical usefulness of structuration theory.

By providing greater clarity on the different levels of analysis as well as processes involved, the theoretical perspectives that can be drawn on, and potential foci for discourse analysis, these propositions could help in informing and perhaps providing more structure to both conceptualization and empirical research so that a potentially more cumulative body of knowledge in the field of organizational discourse could progressively develop. This could help to address, at least in this domain, a perennial problem of organization theory; being a body of knowledge that bears closer resemblance to a confusing and sometimes incoherent surrealist painting rather than a collection of puzzles with ultimately mutually fitting pieces that will, in good time, form coherent, and perhaps pleasing, pictures.

NOTES

1. Both social constructionism and social cognition research, for example, have become fragmented over time into distinct interpretive and positivist streams (Bowering 2000; Condor and Antaki 1997).

2. The following discussion of discourse as situated symbolic action draws from Heracleous and Marshak (2004), and Heracleous (2004).

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