

Heracleous, L. 2004. *Interpretivist approaches to organizational discourse*. In Grant, D., Phillips, N., Hardy, C., Putnam, L. and Osrick, C. (Eds.), *Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. Beverly Hills: Sage: 175-192.

7

## Interpretivist Approaches to Organizational Discourse

Loizos Th. Heracleous

### INTERPRETIVISM AND THE LINGUISTIC TURN

There is a broad range of theoretical approaches within the interpretive tradition, with varying ontological and epistemological positions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). However, a key unifying factor is their focus on achieving a *meaningful understanding* of the actors' frame of reference, what Weber (1922) referred to as *verstehen*. In Weber's view, this ability and desire to achieve an in-depth, first-order understanding was what distinguished the social from the natural sciences. Meaningful understanding is often contrasted with *explanation* (Ricoeur, 1991), the search for causal, law-like deterministic regularities that is to be found in the positivist tradition – a tradition based on the methodology of the natural sciences. This simple contrast, however, does not do justice to the potential for meaningful understanding and explanation to operate in a complementary manner.

Interpretivism should not be equated with subjectivism. This perspective is based upon the misconception that interpretivism lacks 'objectivity' and instead affords primacy to the idiosyncratic meanings of single actors with no necessary relation to a more shared, intersubjective and verifiable reality. If interpretivism were to assume more subjective properties, this would suggest a potential for unlimited interpretations of observations and textual data, with no means of verification or validation. Such a characterization is at the heart of Denzin's (1983) criticism that interpretivists reject generalization since each instance of observed social interaction is unique and social settings are complex and indeterminate.

Interpretive understanding does not, however, mean a degeneration to subjectivism, unlimited interpretations and the inability to make any sort of generalization,

and several scholars emphasize this point. For Weber (1922), for example, the search for generalizations derived inductively from first-order data was compatible with, and indeed dependent on, the need for meaningful understanding of social action. His ideal types were aimed inductively to derive second-order frameworks based on regularities and patterns of observed phenomena. Eco's (1990) 'limits of interpretation', in addition, is an eloquent statement of the position that having unlimited interpretations does not imply that all interpretations are equally likely or valid. Textual interpretations can be informed, limited or constrained by such features as the semantic meaning of the words used, the internal coherence of the text, its cultural context, as well as the interpreter's own frame of reference (Eco, 1990). Ricœur (1991) and Giddens (1979, 1987) have also proposed criteria for validity of textual interpretations as a counter to subjectivism and relativism, that will be discussed below in the section on hermeneutics. Finally, Williams (2000), argues that interpretivists do in fact generalize, and that generalization in interpretive research is 'inevitable, desirable and possible'. He distinguishes between total generalizations (deterministic laws or axioms), statistical generalizations (where the probability of a situation or feature occurring can be calculated from its instances within a sample representative of a wider population), and *moderatum* generalizations (where aspects of a situation are examples of broader sets of features). He suggests that interpretive research does not aim to make total or statistical generalizations but can make moderatum generalizations, within the limits of the inductive problem (that one cannot generalize from a small number of cases to unknown cases) and the ontological problem of categorical equivalence (that generalizations within one category of experience of domain may not apply to other categories).

Interpretive discourse analysis is thus not content with merely identifying the subjective meanings attached to single texts; it considers multiple texts where they constitute bodies of discourse<sup>1</sup>. In doing so, it aims to identify discursive structures and patterns across these texts such as enthymemes, central themes or root metaphors, and to explore how these structures influence and shape agents' interpretations, actions and social practices (e.g., Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001).

The linguistic turn in the social sciences has drawn attention to the way language shapes or constructs actors' first-order interpretations and actions and thus its role in shaping social practices and social reality. This orientation goes against earlier 'correspondence' or 'representational' views of language, as accurately representing (but not constructing) the world, and merely functioning as a conduit for the transfer of pre-determined communicative messages. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1968) was instrumental in advancing this constructive view of language, interestingly repudiating his earlier representational theory of language advanced in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1955).

The next section addresses the question of the discursive construction of reality. Interpretive approaches assume that reality is socially constructed and that discourses (as collections of texts using the raw material of language) have a central role in this process. We thus set the context for discussing interpretive approaches

by discussing the process of discursive reality construction. Within this process, a useful way to view discourse is as situated symbolic action (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000). The generation and interpretation of discourses is context-dependent or situated in broader contexts; discourse is action in the sense that its originators aim to achieve certain outcomes through communication; and discourse is symbolic not only in a textual, semantic sense, but in a more substantive sense indicating actors' assumptions, values and beliefs through actors' discursive choices (conscious or subconscious) that construct and evoke frames of reference for interpreting issues. The last part of this section on 'discourse and cognition' adopts a cognitive perspective to suggest that discourse constructs social reality through its constructive effects on actors' cognitions.

The third section discusses interpretive approaches to organizational discourse, and in particular the fields of hermeneutics, rhetoric, metaphor, symbolic interactionism and critical discourse analysis. These theoretical fields all share a constructive ontology of social phenomena, ascribe a central role to discourse in this process, and offer complementary ways of understanding it. In other words, these are not simply abstract theoretical approaches, but also offer more concrete analytical directions for conducting discourse analyses (Table 7.1 summarizes the main conceptual orientations and potential analytical directions of these fields). Finally, the conclusion includes a brief outline of the main ideas in this chapter, and highlights the value of the interpretive discourse approaches discussed here.

## DISCOURSE AS CONSTRUCTIVE OF SOCIAL REALITY

### *Social constructionism and the fluidity of social reality*

How does discourse construct social reality? Underlying this question is the realization that social phenomena do not have the same solidity, stability and amenability to experimental observation as natural phenomena. They are defined by actors themselves and can thus be better understood if we take into account first-order meanings of the actors involved; a phenomenological view that became a cornerstone of the interpretive paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Social phenomena are characterized by high degrees of latitude in how they are portrayed as well as interpreted by social actors. Consequently, actors can both take control or manipulate how they present issues, as well as employ selective perception in order to protect and maintain their routinized or comfortable ways of perceiving issues. As Hardy and Phillips (2002, p. 2) put it, 'the things that make up the social world – including our very identities – appear out of discourse ... without discourse, there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse, we cannot understand social reality, our experiences, or ourselves'.

Early social constructivists provide some interesting insights into this process. Berger and Luckmann (1966) 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’ (1966, 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’ (1966, p. 55) within which daily routines proceed. Language also creates mental frames that are ‘metacommunicative’ (Bateson, 1972, p. 188), simultaneously highlighting certain meanings and excluding others, evoking particular typifications and associations through framing and connotation (Phillips & Brown, 1993, p. 1564). Language, in this perspective, creates conditioned (rather than universal) rationalities as widespread ways of thinking within particular social systems, which become elements of those systems’ social realities (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001).

Social reality, seen as shared mental schemes or, as Moscovici (1981) has termed them, social representations, is thus mainly based on *discursive* interaction. Social representations are ‘largely acquired, used and changed, through text and talk’ (Van Dijk, 1990, p. 165). 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, p. 134).

#### *Discourse as situated symbolic action*

One useful way of understanding the nature of discourse and its effects on social reality is to view it as situated symbolic action. Speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975) offers a compelling statement of *discourse as action*. Austin (1962, p. 12) 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’ (emphases in original). Austin went on to distinguish analytically between locutionary speech acts (the act of saying something) (1962, p. 94), illocutionary speech acts (what individuals intend to achieve in saying something) (1962, p. 98), and lastly perlocutionary speech acts (the actual effects of utterances on their audience) (1962, p. 101). In practice, however, an utterance can perform all three simultaneously. The insights of speech act theory formed the theoretical foundation for discourse pragmatics, the study of language in use (Blum-Kulka, 1997).

Speech act theory, however, essentially remains at the micro level of single utterances without extending to the broader level of discourse as patterned collections of texts, so that it cannot analyse what Van Dijk (1977) has termed ‘macro’ speech acts, or Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) ‘grand’ or ‘mega’ discourses. To achieve this, a more contextually sensitive and holistic approach would be needed, such as hermeneutic or rhetorical analysis. At the same time discourse is also *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 & Luckmann, 1966). Discourse is also *situated* in that discursive interaction takes place within embedded contexts that condition intended and perceived meanings, and pose rules of discursive and behavioural appropriateness, as vividly shown by ethnographies of communication (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991; Hymes, 1964).

### *Discourse and cognition: constructing first-order realities*

Cognition has been posed as the 'missing link' (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 251) between discourse and action. The interaction of discourse and cognition can be elucidated through the key concept of schema (Condor & Antaki, 1997). Originally developed by Head and Bartlett, the concept of schema has since become a central construct of cognitive psychology (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 & Crocker, 1981, p. 91). Interpretive schemes and discourse are mutually constituted in a process of continuous interaction, where 'understanding is accomplished and communicated 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 sensemaking processes' (Gioia, 1986, p. 50). In this perspective discourse is not merely informative, but 'transformative' (Phillips & Brown, 1993, p. 1548). Cognitive structures can be affirmed, elaborated or challenged when discourse is both interpreted and produced through them (Eoyang, 1983, p. 113).

Discourse influences not only the functioning of existing schemata, but also the long-term delineation of their parameters. Linguistic labels learned through social interaction influence cognitive development, and during communication or even during actors' reflections, linguistic labels evoke and utilize cognitive schemata. When schemata are developed, they are then heuristically employed as interpretative tools in the long term (Bloom, 1981).

Interpretive schemes and agents' (discursive) actions are interrelated in a continuously dialectic fashion; action arises out of interpretive schemes, and new experiences or reflections influence interpretive schemes and thus subsequent action (Gioia, 1986). Discursive social interaction is therefore central to the construction of social reality and to agents' actions based on this reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Moscovici, 1981). This interactive view between cognition and discursive action emphasizes the relatively malleable nature of interpretive schemes, which can progressively be re-defined through the addition or attrition of concepts, the transformation of perceived causal associations, or the altered salience of concepts (Eoyang, 1983).

## INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES TO ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE

In this section five prominent interpretive approaches to the study of discourse are discussed: hermeneutics, rhetoric, metaphor, symbolic interactionism and critical discourse analysis. All of these fields deserve a place in a discussion of interpretive approaches to organizational discourse for the following four reasons: First, they all assume a constructive ontology of social phenomena. Second, they ascribe a central role to discourse (or texts that constitute discourses, or language as the raw material of texts) in the constructive process. Third, they view, in their own particular ways, discourse as context-dependent or situated; as a form of action where textual communications are intended to achieve things in their social context; and as symbolic, not only in a semantic sense but in a more substantive sense of indicating agents' assumptions, values and beliefs and invoking frames of reference for interpreting issues. Fourth, these fields do not remain at an abstract level but provide more specific directions for conducting discourse analyses, which can shed light on different angles of the discursive construction of social reality and its effects on agents' actions, social practices, organizations and societies. Table 7.1 portrays the main conceptual orientations and potential analytical directions suggested by the five fields discussed.

### *Hermeneutics*

The roots of the word 'hermeneutics' lie in the Greek term *hermeneuein*, or 'to interpret'. The earliest usage of the term referred to principles of biblical interpretation, but this was subsequently broadened to refer to general rules of philological exegesis. Hermeneutics involves both the task of textual interpretation as well as the reflexive concern with the nature of understanding and interpretation itself (Palmer, 1969). Hermeneutics has had a rich conceptual history. Key figures in the development of hermeneutic thought include Schleiermacher, who sought to develop a 'general hermeneutics' whose principles could serve as the foundation for all kinds of textual interpretation; Dilthey, who saw hermeneutics as the core discipline which could serve as the foundation for all humanistic studies; Heidegger, who developed a view of hermeneutics as the phenomenological explication of human existence; and Gadamer, who followed the lead of Heidegger's work to develop 'philosophical hermeneutics', the encounter with Being through language (see Ricœur, 1991, pp. 53–74 for an overview of these scholars' work).

Ricœur's work returned the focus of hermeneutics to its initial concerns with textual interpretation. He has defined hermeneutics as the 'art of interpreting texts' (Ricœur, 1997, p. 66), posing as a fundamental concern the fact that once discourse is inscribed as 'text' it is severed from its author, and its meaning as interpreted by new audiences may not necessarily coincide with the author's original intentions (Ricœur, 1991, pp. 105–24). Thus, the hermeneutical task, according to Ricœur, becomes the interpretation of texts in contexts different from

**Table 7.1** *Conceptual orientations and analytical directions*

| Theoretical approach   | Main conceptual orientations  | Potential analytical directions  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Hermeneutics</b><br>Giddens, 1979, 1987; Palmer, 1969; Ricœur, 1991         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on interpretation of texts and on nature of interpretation itself</li> <li>• Removal from subjectivist stance; some textual interpretations more valid than others, based on textual context</li> <li>• Commitment to in-depth textual interpretation through researchers' longitudinal immersion in texts' social and organizational context</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textual interpretations in context and over time, being sensitive to alternative interpretations</li> <li>• Search for central themes, thematic constructions and thematic interconnections</li> <li>• Triangulation of patterns in ethnographic and textual data</li> </ul>                                |
| <b>Rhetoric</b><br>Aristotle, 1991; Gill & Whedbee, 1997                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rhetoric as both functional and constructive, employed in both grand oratory and everyday life</li> <li>• Focus on study of rhetoric in use, and on its situational, temporal and social contexts</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aim to identify agents' rhetorical strategies and their central themes</li> <li>• Identify how themes are constructed in positive/normative orders</li> <li>• Identification of enthymemes and their functions in context</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Metaphor</b><br>Black, 1979; Lakoff, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on constructive role of metaphors in agents' conceptual systems and their influence on social action</li> <li>• Nature of epistemic and ontological correspondences between source and target domains</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of root metaphors and aspects highlighted by actors over time and in context</li> <li>• Mapping target and source domains and their implication complexes</li> <li>• Mapping inter-metaphor systematicity and its implications</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Symbolic interactionism</b><br>Mead, 1912, 1913, 1922, 1925; Blumer, 1969   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meanings arise and are modified through social interaction</li> <li>• Action arises out of subjective meanings that agents attach to situations</li> <li>• Actors' identity itself arises through social interaction</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on social interaction and on the meanings involved in interaction</li> <li>• Study of discourse in use and its relation to subjective meanings</li> <li>• How does discourse in use embody and construct subject identities?</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Critical discourse analysis</b><br>Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 1993 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discursive reality construction is hegemonic, biased in favour of dominant interests</li> <li>• Social practices viewed as 'natural' are a surreptitious consequence of dominant discourses aligned with the powerful</li> <li>• Subjects' subjectivity and identity is constructed by dominant discourses</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on links between discourse and power</li> <li>• Aims to uncover the ways through which discursive reality construction is skewed in favour of dominant interests</li> <li>• Analysis is contextual and often historical, relating discourses to social practices and to powerful interests</li> </ul> |

that of the author and the original audience, with the ideal intent of discovering new avenues to understanding.

Ricœur notes that there may be several interpretations of texts depending on readers' pre-understandings (interpretive schemes) and their particular interpretations of a text in relation to their own perceived situation (1991, pp. 1–20). Acknowledging the possibility of various textual interpretations, however, does not necessitate a lapse to relativism, the resignation to the idea that there is no way to arrive at certain textual interpretations that are more valid than other potential interpretations. In contrast to poststructuralist approaches, for example, where the text is seen as having a plurality of indeterminate and irreducible meanings and which 'practises the infinite deferment of the signified' (Barthes, 1977, p. 158),

hermeneutic approaches assume that some meanings are more valid than others, given a text's particular social-historical context (Phillips & Brown, 1993). For Ricœur (1991, pp. 144–67), for example, a text displays a limited field of potential interpretations as opposed to being a repository of potentially unlimited meanings.

Giddens suggests that the interpretive validity of texts can be improved through ethnographic inquiry in the settings of production of the text, the intellectual resources the author has drawn on and the characteristics of the audience it is addressed to (Giddens, 1987, p. 106). He emphasizes the necessity of studying texts as 'the concrete medium and outcome of a process of production, reflexively monitored by its author or reader'. Inquiry into this productive process involves exploring the author's or speaker's intentions as well as the practical knowledge involved in writing or speaking with a certain style for a particular audience (1979, p. 43).

Researchers employing hermeneutical discourse analysis search for central themes in texts, for thematic unity (how central themes are interrelated in broader argumentations both within texts and intertextually), and often relate these to patterns in ethnographic data over time. The analysis is treated as a process of discovery, going round the hermeneutic circle, from part to the whole and vice versa, each time further enriching the interpretations (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987; Thatchenkery, 1992).

### *Rhetoric*

Rhetorical discourse analysis is highly versatile (van Graber, 1973) and has been extensively utilized in organizational analysis (e.g. Finstad, 1998; Hopkins & Reicher, 1997; Huff, 1983; Watson, 1995). Rhetoric can explore the situation, the audience, the rhetor and textual features such as structure and temporality, enthymemes, metaphor and iconicity, not for their own sake, but in order to discover how rhetorical discourse can influence actors' understandings, values and beliefs by eloquently and persuasively espousing particular views of the world (Gill & Whedbee, 1997). Rhetorical principles have thus been fruitfully applied to wider, macro-level discourses to explore the discourses' constructive effects on peoples' understanding of pressing social issues (e.g., Charland, 1987; Gronbeck, 1973). Analyses can also focus on how apparently plain speaking can actually be rhetorical (Gowler & Legge, 1983) through the use of certain ideas but not others, through the particular implications and connotations of the ideas used, through the construction of certain kinds of subject, and through what the 'frame' evoked by the ideas used highlights or excludes (Bateson, 1972; Harré, 1981).

Rhetorical principles and processes have often been perceived as morally questionable, a view initiated since Plato's condemnation of rhetoric as inducing 'belief without knowledge' and as 'ignoble and bad' (Kinneavy, 1971, pp. 221–2). One can see the Platonic view of rhetoric as a tool for making manipulative representations in work, such as Keenoy (1990) or Alvesson (1993). Although views of rhetoric diverge in their evaluative standpoint, they do presuppose an understanding of rhetoric as a potent tool for constructing social reality. Rhetoric, for example, can

be used to manage social representations (Moscovici, 1981), to initiate change (Bitzer, 1968), to sustain existing socio-political arrangements in ways that advantage certain social groupings at the expense of others (Gowler & Legge, 1983), or to achieve 'appropriate' self-presentation of actors to a community of peers (Harré, 1981).

Rhetorical strategies most often take the form of enthymemes, which are not necessarily consciously evoked, being located in actors' practical consciousness rather than discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1984, pp. 44–5). Rhetoric, in this perspective, is not some sort of grand oratory, but a mundane, everyday aspect of human competence (Watson, 1995). Enthymemes are rhetorical structures of argumentation. In contrast to syllogisms in logic, enthymemes are usually not fully expressed, one or more of their premises being taken for granted or assumed by the audience (Eemeren et al., 1997). The premises in enthymemes are only generally or probably true in a particular social context; their truth or rationality is not universal, but is conditioned by and arises from the socio-cultural features in that context (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996).

In terms of organizational discourse analysis, therefore, persistent patterns in argumentations, which pervade and operate in diverse situational, organizational and temporal contexts, can be seen as actors' rhetorical strategies (Heracleous, 2002). Identification and analysis of enthymemes, and particularly their unstated and assumed premises, can enable researchers to uncover the taken-for-granted values and beliefs of actors in a particular social context (Gill & Whedbee, 1997; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001).

### *Metaphor*

It has been recognized since Aristotle that metaphor is more than just a figure of speech. Seeing A in terms of B, metaphor is not only the archetype of related tropes such as metonymy, synecdoche simile and analogy, but more importantly, it is constructive of both social reality (Lakoff, 1990; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and scientific inquiry (Heracleous, 2003; Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1986), through inducing, in actors' minds, ontological and epistemic correspondences between otherwise distinct domains (Lakoff, 1990).

Literal views of metaphor see it as merely a statement of similarity or analogy that is potentially expendable, since what was stated metaphorically could also be stated literally (Black, 1979). This perspective is identified by Tsoukas (1993) as consistent with objectivist approaches in social science that view the use of metaphor as not only unnecessary but also distorting of the 'facts' that should be expressed in literal language (e.g., Pinder & Bourgeois, 1982; see Morgan, 1983 for a reply).

Constructionist views of metaphor, on the other hand, such as the 'interaction' view (Black, 1979), hold that metaphor is involved in fundamental thought processes through the projection of 'associated implications' of a secondary subject on a primary subject, where individuals select, emphasize, suppress and organize features of the primary subject by applying to it statements isomorphic with the secondary subject's implicative complex. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) seminal

study on the metaphorical structuring of experience emphasizes the status of metaphor as a constructive influence on social actors' conceptual system, in terms of which thought and action occurs. Lakoff provided a compelling statement of the constructionist view of metaphors through his 'invariance hypothesis', where he suggested that metaphors involve both ontological correspondences (where entities in the target domain correspond systematically to entities in the source domain) as well as epistemic correspondences (where knowledge about the source domain is mapped on to knowledge about the target domain) (Lakoff, 1990, p. 48).

The creative potential of metaphors has formed the basis for metaphorical typologies. Schön, for example, distinguished generative metaphors from non-generative ones by the former's ability to generate new perceptions, explanations and inventions (Schön, 1979, p. 259) and Black (1979) distinguished strong from weak metaphors by the former's possessing a high degree of 'implicative elaboration' (1979, p. 27). But are metaphorical statements creative by revealing aspects of the target domain which were already there, or by constituting such aspects by virtue of the two domains that they bring into interaction? Black argues that the latter is possible in the form of his 'strong creativity thesis' (Black, 1979, pp. 37–9). The creative potential of metaphorical statements depends upon there being sufficient differences between the two domains for a creative tension to exist (Morgan, 1983). As Aristotle has put it, 'metaphors should be transferred from things that are related but not obviously so' (1999, 3: 11: 5).

The link between metaphor and action rests markedly on metaphors' evaluative loading. This evaluative loading points implicitly towards what 'ought' to be done under situations framed metaphorically, the 'normative leap' resulting from metaphors' naming and framing processes (Schön, 1979, pp. 264–5). As Hirsch and Andrews have noted in the context of their analysis of the language of corporate takeovers, 'once the roles and relations are assigned, proper procedures and/or proper outcomes can be readily deduced. Sleeping Beauty must be liberated and wed; the shark must be annihilated; the black-hat brought to justice; the honorable soldier must fight doggedly, and so on' (1983, p. 149).

The potency of metaphor to re-frame situations and move individuals to action in a particular direction has been illustrated by the significant amount of research in organization theory on the role of metaphors in facilitating organizational change (e.g., Marshak, 1993; Pondy, 1983; Sackmann, 1989). Metaphors can offer new ways of looking at existing situations (Crider & Cirillo, 1991; Lakoff, 1990; Morgan, 1980, 1983), while simultaneously acting as a bridge from a familiar to a new state (Pondy, 1983). The high latitude of interpretation afforded by metaphorical statements can help to accommodate the interpretations of organizational groups perceiving their interests to be mutually incompatible (Crider & Cirillo, 1991), and unstructured situations can be made more concrete and comprehensible through the use of metaphor (Sackmann, 1989).

Metaphorical discourse analysis can focus on the root metaphors underlying a certain discourse, on the nature of the target and source domains and their

implication complexes, on the presence of inter-metaphor systematicity (interrelations between metaphors underlying a discourse), or on the longitudinal shifts in root metaphors and the aspects of their implication complexes highlighted by actors in a social system.

Potential disagreements and ambiguities in metaphor use remain, however, for example whether a single or several metaphors should be used to understand a given situation, to what extent politics are involved in metaphor use, to what extent literal language is needed (or is feasible) in analysing organizations, or to what extent different metaphors are incommensurable or complementary (Palmer & Dunford, 1996). These ambiguities raise the importance and desirability of researcher reflexivity, a central issue in organizational discourse; the need to clarify one's assumptions and ideological biases and to consider how these shape various aspects of the research process (Heracleous, 2001).

### *Symbolic interactionism*

Symbolic interactionism as a term was first used by Herbert Blumer (1969), drawing primarily on the work of Mead, to propose a new paradigm for the study of social issues. While symbolic interactionism originated as a reaction to the dominant positivist paradigm in sociology, many of its core premises have progressively been accepted in mainstream research (Fine, 1993). For symbolic interactionism, meanings do not reside in objects themselves, as distinct from social interaction. Symbolic interactionism assumes that individuals' action arises out of the meanings that situations have for them; that meanings arise from social interaction with others; and that individuals modify meanings in the process of thinking through issues and interacting further with other individuals (Blumer, 1969, p. 2; Thomas & Thomas, 1970). The main distinguishing factor of human from animal behaviour, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, is the use of language and other forms of symbolic communication.

Methodologically, symbolic interactionism has a dual focus on social interaction and on the meanings involved in interaction (Prasad, 1993). Its preferred methods involve participant observation and intensive in-depth interviewing. Even though it favours qualitative methods, however, symbolic interactionism also encourages generalizations derived inductively from qualitative data, consistent with other fields discussed in this chapter.

George H. Mead, the intellectual precursor 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, p. 405). The self becomes a social object when it 'assumes ... the attitudes of generalized others' (1925, p. 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, p. 160).

Through discursive symbolic interaction, therefore, meanings become institutionalized or 'objectified' (Berger & 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 & Hendry, 2000).

### *Critical discourse analysis*

Critical discourse analysis shares with the above approaches the interpretive concern with exploring the social construction of reality, and with the role of discourse in this process. It emphasizes, however, that this process is not neutral or unbiased. Symbolic universes function not only as communicational and sense-making mechanisms but also as legitimating ones (Giddens, 1984), representing different and potentially conflicting views of reality. Confrontations of symbolic universes are thus in effect power confrontations, where 'he who has the bigger stick has the better chance of imposing his definitions of reality' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 127). Critical discourse analysis aims to demystify situations and perceptions that may be viewed as 'natural', but that have in effect been discursively constructed over time by groups in power aiming to skew social reality and institutional arrangements to their own advantage (Barthes, 1972; Gramsci, 1971).

Critical discourse analysis consists of a variety of approaches drawing from strands of critical theory within Western Marxism (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), as well as from other critical theorists such as Foucault, particularly his latter genealogical work (1980) focusing on the intimate links between discourse and power. Critical discourse analysis is ethically committed to unmasking the processes through which discourses promote social constructions that support and perpetuate the interests of dominant groups or classes (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 1990). In this connection, discourses are not seen as neutral or unbiased, but as 'sites of power' (Mumby & Stohl, 1991, p. 316) and as entrenched 'social practices' (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258) that produce particular sorts of subjectivity and identity (du Gay & Salaman, 1992) and influence organizational practices in particular ways (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2001).

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, 1972; Gramsci, 1971). Critical discourse analysis assumes that social representations (shared cognitions) are principally constituted through discourse or, more succinctly, that 'managing the mind of others is essentially a function of text and talk' (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 254).

Critical discourse analyses thus follow interpretive, context-sensitive, often historical methodologies to analyse discourses empirically, to discover how ideologies permeate and manifest in these discourses, and highlight discourses' organizational and societal effects. In using this approach, analysts aim to bring about

demystification and challenge of the *status quo* and thus, ideally, social change. The foci of analysis are often pressing social problems, such as racism, gender relations or ethnic tensions, not merely as a scholarly endeavour but as a committed form of social intervention (Van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 1990).

## CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this chapter, the meaning of interpretivism was outlined as the commitment to in-depth understanding of actors' first-order interpretations. Interpretivism was distinguished from subjectivism in terms of interpretivism's acceptance of more general frameworks derived inductively from data that extends beyond individual subjective viewpoints. Organizational discourse analysis, in this vein, focuses on bodies of texts that constitute discourses, and on the discursive structures and patterns that pervade these texts rather than on individual texts, seeking to relate such structures to the social practices associated with specific discourses.

The second section of the chapter expanded on discourse as constructive of social reality, noting the constructive ontology of social phenomena and the potential of actors to manage social representations through discourse. Discourse was discussed as action that is situated in particular social contexts; and as symbolic in terms of portraying actors' values and beliefs and invoking frames for interpreting the issues it refers to. Finally, the section addressed the constructive effects of discourse on interpretive schemes, adopting a cognitive perspective.

In the third section, five prominent interpretive approaches to organizational discourse were discussed: hermeneutics, rhetoric, metaphor, symbolic interactionism and critical discourse analysis. Both their conceptual orientations as well as potential analytical directions for conducting discourse analyses were outlined, and summarized in Table 7.1.

Discussion of the nature of discourse as composed of numerous texts that share certain structural features, that engender conditioned rationalities and influence agents' interpretations, actions and social practices has shown that interpretive discourse research, as promoted by the interpretive approaches discussed in this chapter, is far from subjectivist (in the sense of delivering only idiosyncratic findings that cannot support the discovery of broader understandings of social systems or suggest any types of generalization).

At the same time, inductive research grounded in field data and, where possible, supported by field observations of agents' actions and social practices, would certainly not support uncontrolled generalizations that go beyond what can reasonably be supported by the data. As Eco, Ricœur, Giddens and others have suggested, there are criteria for textual validity that severely undermine the notion of unlimited interpretation as an avenue to useful understanding of social processes. Even though, in a narrow sense, a text can mean what its reader wants it to mean, at the same time the nature of the text itself (and of bodies of texts that constitute discourses) cannot be completely ignored, manipulated or violated. For example,

words have a semantic meaning on which communication is based; and this presupposed meaning, as it were, provides the foundation for interpretations and re-interpretations of texts. If those researching organizational discourse keep in mind the criteria for interpretive validity that Eco, Ricœur, Giddens and others have proposed, and view the issue of multiple interpretations in a reasoned and substantive way, then some interpretations will be found to be more valid, useful and insightful than others. The approaches discussed in this chapter offer a number of ways by which to explore and develop them profitably.

## NOTES

I am grateful to Professors David Barry, David Grant, Cliff Oswick and Hari Tsoukas for their valuable feedback and suggestions on earlier versions of the manuscript. Research funding from National University of Singapore research grant R-313-000-038-112 is also gratefully acknowledged.

- 1 Both discourse and related terms, such as language, text or narrative, have been conceptualized and categorized in diverse ways in organization theory (e.g., Grant, Keenoy & Oswick, 1998; Mumby & Clair, 1997), as evidenced in this *Handbook*. Interpretive-based approaches to discourse analysis view discourses as collections of texts situated in social contexts, sharing certain structural features and having both functional and constructive effects in their contexts. Texts are thus manifestations of discourses and language is the raw material of discourses.

## REFERENCES

- Alvesson, M. (1993) Organizations as rhetoric: Knowledge-intensive firms and the struggle with ambiguity. *Journal of Management Studies*, 30: 997–1015.
- Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2000) Varieties of discourse: On the study of organizations through discourse analysis. *Human Relations*, 53: 1125–49.
- Aristotle (1991) *On rhetoric*. Trans. G.A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J.L. (1962) *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1972) *Mythologies*. Trans. A. Lavers. London: Vintage.
- Barthes, R. (1977) *Image, music, text*. London: Fontana.
- Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an ecology of mind*. London: Intertext.
- Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1966) *The social construction of reality*. London: Penguin.
- Bitzer, L.F. (1968) The rhetorical situation. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 1 (1): 1–14.
- Black, M. (1979) More about metaphor. In A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (pp. 19–43). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bloom, A.H. (1981) *The linguistic shaping of thought*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Blum-Kulka, S. (1997) Discourse pragmatics. In T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (Vol. 2, pp. 38–63). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Blumer, H. (1969) *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. (1979) *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Charland, M. (1987) Constitutive rhetoric: The case of the people Quebecois. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73: 133–50.

- Condor, S. & Antaki, C. (1997) Social cognition and discourse. In T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (Vol. 1, pp. 320–47). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Crider, C. & Cirillo, L. (1991) Systems of interpretation and the function of metaphor. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 21: 171–95.
- Denzin, N. (1983) Interpretive interactionism. In G. Morgan (ed.), *Beyond method: Strategies for social research* (pp. 126–46). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Eco, U. (1990) *The limits of interpretation*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Eemeren, F.H., Grootendorst, R., Jackson, S. & Jacobs, S. (1997) Argumentation. In T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse Studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (Vol. 1, pp. 208–29). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Eoyang, C. (1983) Symbolic transformation of belief systems. In L.R. Pondy, P.J. Frost, G. Morgan & T.C. Dandridge (eds), *Organizational symbolism*, (pp. 109–21). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Fairclough, N. & Wodak, R. (1997) Critical discourse analysis. In T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (Vol. 2, pp. 258–84). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Fine, G.A. (1993) The sad demise, mysterious disappearance, and glorious triumph of symbolic interactionism. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 19: 61–87.
- Finstad, N. (1998) The rhetoric of organizational change. *Human Relations*, 51: 717–40.
- Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–77*. New York: Pantheon.
- du Gay, P. & Salaman, G. (1992) The cult(ure) of the customer. *Journal of Management Studies*, 29: 615–33.
- Gergen, K.J. & Thatchenkery, T. (1996) Organization science as social construction: Postmodern potentials. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 32: 356–77.
- Giddens, A. (1979) *Central problems in social theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. (1984) *The constitution of society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1987) *Social theory and modern sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gill, A.M. & Whedbee, K. (1997) Rhetoric. In T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (Vol. 1, pp. 157–83). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gioia, D.A. (1986) Symbols, scripts and sensemaking: Creating meaning in the organizational experience. In H.P. Sims, Jr. & D.A. Gioia (eds), *The thinking organization*: (pp. 49–74). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gowler, D. & Legge, K. (1983) The meaning of management and the management of meaning. In M. Earl (ed.), *Perspectives in management* (pp. 197–233). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Graber, M. (1973) Functional criticism: A rhetoric of Black power. In G.P. Mohrmann, C.J. Stewart & D.J. Ochs (eds), *Explorations in rhetorical criticism* (pp. 207–22). University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited by Q. Hoare & G. Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Grant, D., Keenoy, T. & Oswick, C. (1998) Organizational discourse: Of diversity, dichotomy and multi-disciplinarity. In D. Grant, T. Keenoy & C. Oswick (eds), *Discourse and organization* (pp. 1–13). London: Sage.
- Gronbeck, B.E. (1973) The rhetoric of social-institutional change: Black action at Michigan. In G.P. Mohrmann, C.J. Stewart & D.J. Ochs (eds), *Explorations in rhetorical criticism* (pp. 96–123). University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Gumperz, J.J. & Levinson, S.C. (1991) Rethinking linguistic relativity. *Current Anthropology*, 32: 613–23.
- Hardy, C. & Phillips, N. (1999) No joking matter: Discursive struggle in the Canadian refugee system. *Organization Studies*, 20: 1–24.

- Hardy, C. & Phillips, N. (2002) Discourse analysis: *Investigating processes of social construction*. Qualitative Research Methods Series, 50. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Harré, R. (1981) Rituals, rhetoric and social cognitions. In J.P. Forgas (ed.), *Social cognition: Perspectives in everyday understanding* (pp. 211–24). London: Academic Press.
- Heracleous, L. (2001) An ethnographic study of culture in the context of organizational change. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 37: 426–46.
- Heracleous, L. (2002) *A tale of three discourses: The dominant, the strategic and the marginalized*. Working Paper, School of Business, National University of Singapore.
- Heracleous, L. (2003) A comment on the role of metaphor in knowledge generation. *Academy of Management Review*, 28: 190–1.
- Heracleous, L. & Barrett, M. (2001) Organizational change as discourse: Communicative actions and deep structures in the context of information technology implementation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44: 755–78.
- Heracleous, L. & Hendry, J. (2000) Discourse and the study of organization: Toward a structural perspective. *Human Relations*, 53: 1251–86.
- Hirsch, P.M. & Andrews, J.A. (1983) Ambushes, shootouts, and knights of the roundtable: The language of corporate takeovers. In L.R. Pondy, P.J. Frost, G. Morgan & T.C. Dandridge (eds), *Organizational symbolism* (pp. 145–55). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Hopkins, N. & Reicher, S. (1997) Social movement rhetoric and the social psychology of collective action: A case study of anti-abortion mobilization. *Human Relations*, 50: 261–86.
- Huff, A.S. (1983) A rhetorical examination of strategic change. In L.R. Pondy, P.J. Frost, G. Morgan & T.C. Dandridge (eds), *Organizational symbolism* (pp. 167–83). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Hymes, D. (1964) Toward ethnographies of communication. *American Anthropologist*, 66 (6), part 2: 12–25.
- Jacobs, C. & Heracleous, L. (2001) Seeing without being seen: Towards an Archaeology of Controlling Science. *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 31 (3): 113–35.
- Keenoy, T. (1990) Human resource management: Rhetoric, reality and contradiction. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 1: 363–84.
- Kets de Vries, M.F.R. & Miller, D. (1987) Interpreting organizational texts. *Journal of Management Studies*, 24: 233–47.
- Kinneavy, J.L. (1971) *A theory of discourse*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lakoff, G. (1990) The invariance hypothesis: Is abstract reason based on image schemas? *Cognitive Linguistics*, 1: 39–74.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Marshak, R.J. (1993) Managing the metaphors of change. *Organizational Dynamics*, 22: 44–56.
- Mead, G.H. (1912) The mechanism of social consciousness. *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 9 (15): 401–6.
- Mead, G.H. (1913) The social self. *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 10 (14): 374–80.
- Mead, G.H. (1922) A behavioristic account of the significant symbol. *Journal of Philosophy*, 19 (6): 157–63.
- Mead, G.H. (1925) The genesis of the self and social control. *International Journal of Ethics*, 35 (3): 251–77.
- Morgan, G. (1980) Paradigms, metaphor and puzzle solving in organization theory. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25: 660–71.
- Morgan, G. (1983) More on metaphor: Why we cannot control tropes in administrative science. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28: 601–7.
- Morgan, G. (1986) *Images of organization*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

- Moscovici, S. (1981) On social representations. In J.P. Forgas (ed.), *Social cognition: Perspectives on everyday understanding* (pp. 181–209). London: Academic Press.
- Mumby, D.K. & Clair, R.P. (1997) Organizational Discourse. In T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse as social interaction* (pp. 181–205). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mumby, D.K. & Stohl, C. (1991) Power and discourse in organization studies: Absence and the dialectic of control. *Discourse and Society*, 2: 313–32.
- Palmer, I. & Dunford, R. (1996) Conflicting uses of metaphors: Reconceptualizing their use in the field of organizational change. *Academy of Management Review*, 21: 691–717.
- Palmer, R.E. (1969) *Hermeneutics*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Phillips, N. & Brown, J.L. (1993) Analyzing communication in and around organizations: A critical hermeneutic approach. *Academy of Management Journal*, 36: 1547–76.
- Pinder, C.C. & Bourgeois, V.W. (1982) Controlling tropes in administrative science. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 27: 641–52.
- Pondy, L.R. (1983) The role of metaphors and myths in organization and the facilitation of change. In L.R. Pondy, P.J. Frost, G. Morgan & T.C. Dandridge (eds), *Organizational symbolism* (pp. 157–66). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Prasad, P. (1993) Symbolic processes in the implementation of technological change: A symbolic interactionist study of work computerization. *Academy of Management Journal*, 36: 1400–29.
- Ricœur, P. (1991) *From text to action*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Ricœur, P. (1997) Rhetoric-poetics-hermeneutics. In W. Jost & M.J. Hyde (eds), *Rhetoric and hermeneutics in our time: A reader* (pp. 60–72). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Rumelhart, D.E. (1984) Schemata and the cognitive system. In R.S. Wyer, Jr. & T.K. Srull (eds), *Handbook of social cognition*: (pp. 161–88). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sackmann, S. (1989) The role of metaphors in organization transformation. *Human Relations*, 42: 463–85.
- Schön, D.A. (1979) Generative metaphor: A perspective on problem-setting in social policy. In A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (pp. 254–83). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. (1975) Indirect speech acts. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts* (pp. 59–82). New York: Academic Press.
- Taylor, S.E. & Crocker, J. (1981) Schematic bases of social information processing. In E.T. Higgins, C.P. Herman & M.P. Zanna (eds), *Social cognition* (pp. 89–134). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Thatchenkery, T. (1992) Organizations as ‘texts’: Hermeneutics as a model for understanding organizational change. *Research in Organization Change and Development*, 6: 197–233.
- Thomas, W.I. & Thomas, D.S. (1970) Situations defined as real are real in their consequences. In G.P. Stone & H.A. Faberman (eds), *Social psychology through symbolic interaction* (pp. 154–6). Toronto: Xerox College Publishing.
- Tsoukas, H. (1993) Analogical reasoning and knowledge generation in organization theory. *Organization Studies*, 14: 323–46.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1977) *Text and context: Explorations in the semantics and pragmatics of discourse*. London: Longman.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1988) Social cognition, social power and social discourse. *Text*, 8: 129–57.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1990) Social cognition and discourse. In H. Giles & W.P. Robinson (eds), *Handbook of language and social psychology* (pp. 163–83). Chichester: Wiley.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1993) Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse and Society*, 4: 249–83.

- Watson, T.J. (1995) Rhetoric, discourse and argument in organizational sense making: A reflexive tale. *Organization Studies*, 16: 805–21.
- Weber, M. (1922) *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* Trans. G. Roth & G. Wittich). New York: Bedminster.
- Williams, M. (2000) Interpretivism and generalization. *Sociology*, 34: 209–24.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1955) *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1968) *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wodak, R. (1990) Discourse analysis: problems, findings, perspectives. *Text*, 10: 125–32.