


*Discourse, Interpretation,  
Organization*

This much-needed systematic exploration of the emerging field of organizational discourse addresses both scholarly perspectives and empirical applications of the concepts. The interpretive, functional, critical, and structural perspectives are examined in detail. Issues discussed include the constructive potential of discourse; prominent interpretive approaches; the role of discourse, in particular metaphor, in fostering certain organizational outcomes; a critical view addressing the power and political dimensions of discourse; and the dual aspects of discourse as both communicative action and deep structures, interrelated through the modality of interpretive schemes. Application chapters illustrate how discourse theory can be employed in field research, aiding the analyst in gaining a deeper understanding of the social context and of the effects of discourse on that context. In particular, a view of discourse as situated symbolic action, and a structural view of discourse are illustrated empirically, using examples from a major IT organization and a global consulting firm.

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To all the people who make my life meaningful; you  
know who you are

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## *Preface*

This book is based on my research in organizational discourse over the last decade. Starting with my doctoral research, I have conducted theoretical and empirical studies, employing aspects of the four approaches or paradigms that are discussed in this book (interpretive, functional, critical and structurational). Even though what is presented here is far from a comprehensive discussion of the available approaches to understanding and researching discourse (something unlikely to be achieved in a single volume), I have nevertheless endeavoured to present a structured exposition that addresses the main streams of research in organizational discourse and conveys the variety of options, vibrancy and promise of this emerging field.

Chapter 1 underlines the increased attention to discourse in social science, and more particularly in organization theory since the late 1970s. It then addresses the important role of context in understanding discourse; outlines some key features of organizational texts; discusses the role of empirical discourse analysis; outlines the variety of ways in which discourse has been conceptualized and employed; and finally offers some thoughts on what makes a discourse lens for the study of organizations distinctive and fruitful.

Chapters 2–5 then expand on the interpretive, functional, critical and structurational streams to organizational discourse. In chapter 2 interpretivism is outlined as encompassing the commitment to in-depth understanding of actors' first-order interpretations, and distinguished from subjectivism in terms of interpretivism's acceptance of the desirability of more general frameworks derived inductively from data. Then an understanding of discourse as constructive of social reality is developed, where discourse is viewed as situated symbolic action (a view further discussed and employed empirically in chapter 6). Finally, five interpretive approaches to organizational discourse (hermeneutics, rhetoric, metaphor, symbolic interactionism and storytelling) are discussed and their analytical implications outlined.



Chapter 3 addresses the functional approach to organizational discourse where discourse is viewed as language-based communication employed by managerial and social actors for achieving particular ends. Empirical research is drawn on to clarify the importance of understanding and taking account of the soft aspects of organizations in the context of organizational change and development, and the role of discourse, particularly metaphor, in this process. This chapter draws on an organization development intervention where a process involving the construction of “embodied” metaphors was employed to facilitate more effective debate and understanding of a new strategic concept.

Chapter 4 outlines the critical approach to organizational discourse, where discursive social reality construction is seen as imbued with power and interest considerations, where dominant groups attempt to shape reality, social practices, and even subjects’ identities in ways that perpetuate these groups’ own interests. The chapter addresses the work of Michel Foucault, a prominent social theorist who has been particularly influential in critical approaches. It traces Foucault’s conceptions of discourse in his archaeological and genealogical periods, offers a constructive critique of archaeological conceptions of discourse, traces Foucault’s conceptual shifts and concerns in his genealogical period, and finally outlines implications for organizational discourse analysis.

In the context of long-standing divisions in sociology between action and structure-oriented theories, interpretive and functional conceptions of discourse tend to privilege the former, whereas critical approaches tend to privilege the latter. As a basis for a more encompassing understanding of organizational discourse chapter 5 draws on the work of the sociologist Anthony Giddens to propose a structural conceptualization where discourse is viewed as a duality of communicative actions and deep structures, recursively linked through the modality of actors’ interpretive schemes. Relevant implications of this conceptualization are then outlined in terms of placing alternative approaches in context, extending current theoretical perspectives, and having methodological implications in terms of context and temporality.

The final two chapters are then devoted to empirical illustrations of organizational discourse. Chapter 6 presents a conceptualization of

organizational discourse as situated symbolic action, drawing from the fields of speech act theory, rhetoric, ethnography of communication and social constructionism. This conceptualization is then illustrated through analysis of an episode of negotiated order, a meeting of senior managers of a major IT organization where a new business model for its advanced consulting division is being debated. Three complementary and additive levels of analysis are employed: discourse as action, examining what participants said and what they may have intended to achieve through their communicative actions; discourse as situated action, examining the added value that arises from a knowledge of different levels of context; and discourse as symbolic action, involving considerations of how discourse frames, constructs, and represents issues in particular ways. This perspective helps to respond to some of the key challenges facing the organizational discourse field in terms of developing more structured and clearly specified conceptualizations of discourse that are appropriate to the organizational level of analysis; achieving a more holistic and discourse-sensitive understanding of empirical contexts by organizational researchers; and lastly illustrating that organizational discourse analysis is not simply an intellectual luxury but can have pragmatic, relevant implications.

Chapter 7 illustrates an empirical employment of a structurational view of discourse, in combination with an analytical approach based on rhetoric and hermeneutics. The study analyzes the discourses operating in the UK operations of a global consulting firm in the context of its organizational change program. This research clarifies the nature of “modes of discourse” in specific organizational settings; investigates how modes of discourse in such settings can be interrelated; and finally explores the constructive potential of modes of discourse. This research suggests that modes of discourse can be usefully conceptualized as rhetorical enthymemes constituted of relatively stable, normative structures and flexible, action-oriented structures; that modes of discourse can interrelate through their deeper structural features, and can have mutually co-optive or antagonistic relationships; and that the constructive potential of discourse is based primarily on its deeper structures, and on the consonance of surface communicative actions with these structures.

A lot of the research reported in this book has benefited from interactions and collaborations with several research associates over

the years, some still ongoing: Michael Barrett, Andrew Chan, John Hendry, Claus Jacobs, and Robert Marshak; I thank all of them for making the ideas pool richer than it would have been. I would also like to thank Chris Harrison and his colleagues at Cambridge University Press for their professionalism in dealing with all publication aspects of this work, and for putting up with my more flexible and idiosyncratic view of deadlines. Finally, my gratitude goes to my wife for providing an environment where I could spend time with my thoughts without worrying about the need to be sociable.

Loizos Heracleous  
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