Decolonializing discourse: Critical reflections on organizational discourse analysis

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Abstract
Organizational discourse has emerged as a large research field and references to discourse are numerous. As with all dominating approaches problematizations of assumptions are important. This article, partly a follow up of the authors’ frequently cited 2000 Human Relations article, provides a critical and perhaps provocative overview of some of the more recent work and tendencies within the field. It is argued that discourse continues to be used in vague and all-embracing ways, where the constitutive effects of discourse are taken for granted rather than problematized and explored. The article identifies three particular problems prevalent in the current organizational discourse literature: reductionism, overpacking, and colonization and suggests three analytical strategies to overcome these problems: counter-balancing concepts – aiming to avoid seeing ‘everything’ as discourse – relativizing muscularity – being more open about discourse’s constitutive effects – and disconnecting discourse and Discourse through much more disciplined use of discourse vocabulary.

Keywords
discourse, language, methodology, organizational culture, power, subjectivity

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Introduction

As with many other social settings, organizations are important scenes for talk and other forms of language use. When performing organizational duties, people normally talk – with colleagues, customers, bosses, and subordinates. In short, where there is organizational activity, there is normally talk. There are also texts – policy documents, reports, instructions, manuals, press releases, and so on. Many organizations produce texts as their main product: newspapers, publishers, research institutions, advertising agencies, consultancy firms. It is no surprise then that talk, text and discourse in general is increasingly perceived as important as well as problematic in social sciences. It is also increasingly perceived as an important object of study. This trend is part of the linguistic turn that has made its mark on social science for quite some time (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000a, 2000b; Rosenau, 1992). Among other things, the linguistic turn has provided new ways of thinking about language and language use, and their relation to social reality. Increasingly, everything (almost) is viewed as discourse-driven and an adequate understanding of social processes call for a focus on talk and text (and other meanings of discourse). The key assumption is that discourse constitutes and/or constructs whatever phenomenon we are interested in (organizations, individuals, reality). The target is the view that language ‘simply’ reflects reality. The standard claim is that ‘language constructs organizational reality, rather than simply reflects it’ (Hardy et al., 2005: 60). It is in the process of ‘differentiating, fixing, naming, labeling, classifying and relating – all intrinsic processes of discursive organization – that social reality is systematically constructed’ (Chia, 2000: 513).

Generally speaking, we think that the trend towards a more sophisticated understanding of the meaning of talk and language in social settings has been productive. It undoubtedly unsettles the conventional wisdom regarding language in social science – that language is complicated, philosophically speaking, but unproblematic, methodologically speaking and can simply be used as a mirror of whatever is to be studied. We have ourselves partly worked in this tradition. However, the focus on talk and discourse (in a broader sense) is a mixed blessing and certainly not free from problems. Its popularity in fairly broad circles means that it may be tempting to (uncritically) reproduce taken for granted assumptions.

We published in 2000 in *Human Relations* an effort to provide an overview of the field (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000a). We at first had the ambition to give a creative overview of the field through pointing at the metaphors for, or images of, discourse used in the various literatures. This ambition could not be realized, however, as we found most texts on the topic to be vague and incoherent. Authors on discourse could be all over the place. Efforts to specify and stick to a coherent meaning of discourse were sparse and seldom very helpful in making us understand the points they tried to make.

The *Human Relations* 2000 piece has been picked up by many authors on discourse. It is at least cited heavily, in particular for distinguishing between two levels or formative ranges of discourse – local, associated with specific language use and ‘grand discourse’, referring to broader thought systems. We don’t see this attention as necessarily reflecting the qualities of the article as much as the need for trying to get some overview of the discourse field by authors approaching or being engaged in it.
We will take up the theme of the 2000 text and comment on the development and the state of the art of discourse field. We tried in the 2000 article to indicate the importance of considering variation and clarify position, but this crucial part of the article has had less impact than some of the other themes in the piece. We will also reflect upon a number of other key issues in this field. One is the reasons for the field’s (and the term discourse’s) continued popularity, another is the persistent problems with grasping what discourse authors are ‘really’ saying. A third issue, related to the second and to some extent the first, is the difficulties following from a vague and broad, even colonizing, mode of using discourse and ideas associated with the term.

**Why is discourse so popular?**

One common claim among discourse scholars – researchers that frequently and positively use this signifier – is that discourse is very popular because it is somehow better than other approaches for understanding organizations. Grant et al. (2004), for example, relate the interest in discourse to ‘a growing disillusionment with many of the mainstream theories and methodologies’ (p. 1). For sure, there certainly are things that speak in favour of the concept of discourse, and discourse analysis in particular. For example, discourse analysis (DA):

- *emphasizes the communicative character of human interaction*. DA puts emphasis on how human beings interact through language, and the particular tools available. It also highlights the constitutive character of communication, thus evading the trappings of the conduit metaphor (Deetz, 1992) and language as a mirror metaphor (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000b). In this sense DA promotes a profound take on social interaction that stays sensitive to the taken-for-granted nature of much routine interaction, and largely avoids the reification of discursive closure (Deetz, 1992; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2010), such as naturalization, marginalization and neutralization;

- *captures vital (although partial) aspects of dominant organizational activity*. DA makes it possible to focus on and highlight everyday and routine organizational activity such as conversations and other forms of propagating talk and text. This is particularly useful because it makes it possible to anchor the analysis in manifest phenomena (communication activities), thus minimizing the need for speculating about people’s intentions, ideas, states of mind and other non-observable phenomena. This is not to say that research should always focus on observables, nor is it to say that speculation is always fruitless. Rather, it is to say that DA allows for more rigorous and grounded interpretation, precisely because it draws on things that are available for empirical inquiry;

- *is useful for empirical analysis*. This also points to a third benefit of DA. Contrary to many other contemporary ideas that have challenged strongly held assumptions in mainstream research, such as postmodernism and poststructuralism, DA does not only operate on a theoretical or philosophical level. It also informs us, in very pragmatic and concrete ways, on how to research discourses, at least in some versions of DA;
allows for a critical-performative view on organizations. DA provides a processual view on organizations (at least in theory) that understands organizations as emerging properties of continuous acts of organizing (Cooren, 2004) and thus conceptualizes organizations in performative terms (c.f. Butler, 1988; Spicer et al., 2009). As a consequence, DA is sensitive to the reified nature of much mainstream theorizing on organizations, to power relations and the exercise of power in organizations, and thus facilitates the problematization of the status quo (c.f. Leonardi, 2008).

Perhaps here we should add that different uses of the label discourse stand in a varied and sometimes ambiguous relation to a strict focus on language or at least exclusive of such emphasis. Discourse may mean almost anything and some researchers include a broad sweep of phenomenon making a categorization of them as language-focused misleading. However, the emphasis on language as a central and active force is, arguably, the key characteristic making it possible and meaningful to talk of discourse as a summarizing term: ‘Discursive scholars represent a constellation of perspectives united by the view that language does not mirror reality, but constitutes it’ (Fairhurst, 2009: 1608).

Grant et al. (2004) claim that ‘most of the activity in organizations (i.e. organizing and managing) is primarily discursive’ (p. 26). This motivates a marginalization of the non-discursive – if most things are discursive then this non-discursive is by definition rather uninteresting. This claim is problematic. In fact, it can be argued that the interface between discourse and (non-discursive) action is of particular interest in organizational analysis. Fleming and Spicer (2003) draw attention to the cynical consciousness, where people express awareness of problematic social and ideological features, but their actions bear no trace of this. People may be conscious of sexism, racism, consumerism, managerialism, careerism – or at least express convincing talk about being aware of problems and indicate ‘resistance’ or ‘emancipation’ – but this may be limited to ‘discursive smartness’, which then gives an impression of free choice and legitimizes acting in ways expressing and reinforcing these arguably repressive ideologies and forms. There may be clever language use and demonstrated awareness, and action discoupled from this.

If ‘discourse constitutes’ then one may of course be uninterested in action/behaviour ‘as such’ (perhaps something we can’t really study, unless it is talk) – and there is a lot of discourse-inspired work on subjectivity satisfied with a somewhat narrow discourse-subjectivity focus, which may leave the world outside the self-presentations and contemplations of the subject intact and even reinforce it. Identity, for example, may be addressed as ‘a matter of claims, not character; persona, not personality; and presentation, not self’ (Ybema et al., 2009: 307). We do not claim that character and self are more interesting than claims and presentations, but the relationship needs to be considered. This is not necessarily denied by a person into discourse studies, but this approach hardly encourages careful investigations in this area, indicating a possible disconnect between talk and practice. There is, of course, a lot of variation between various discourse students; e.g. the ‘Montreal School’ has a stronger interest in aspects of materiality not subordinated to discourse (e.g. Cooren et al., 2008; Taylor and Robichaud, 2004). Then again, some of this work is perhaps not necessarily best described as organizational discourse, as defined by most authors privileging language.
Discourse has offered an attractive umbrella for people with interest in critical management studies (CMS). Both brands may be career facilitators. We are ourselves no exception from this. While the interest in what Burrell and Morgan (1979) referred to as radical structuralism has faded over recent decades, discourse has gained much popularity (Marshak et al., 2000: 251). Labour processes have been moved to the periphery while talk and text have taken center stage. According to some commentators this is unfortunate as only modestly significant aspects of organizations are emphasized and key features are being marginalized or missed (Conrad, 2004; Fairclough, 2005; Reed, 2000, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Instead critical realism is suggested to be a better ontology than the forms of constructionism favoured by discourse people: ‘From a realist perspective, discourses are the objective effects and ontological referents or relatively stable material resources and durable social relations which bring them into existence’ (Reed, 2000: 528). While we are quite critical of critical realism (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009), we do think there are reasons to consider carefully what academics with critical aspirations actually are focusing upon in terms of a broader social relevance. The issue of relevance is partly a matter of studying the ‘right’ (key) aspects of organizations, but partly also a matter of offering something viewed as relevant outside the limited area of journal editors, reviewers and a small number of readers.

Irrespective of the merits of a language focus and the disillusionment with the mainstream, there may, thus, be other and less positive explanations than theoretical progress for the interest in discourse – or at least framing/labeling work using the ‘discourse of discourse’. We use labels as organizing devices, to form groups, to denote connections. Through flagging one’s belongingness to one camp, there may be social and political support to be gathered (Astley, 1985). Fashion plays a great and perhaps increasing role and researchers mimic others, sometimes mindlessly. This is the case with any intellectual movement or theoretical orientation – whether it is population ecology, gender studies, leadership or postmodernism – and there are no reasons to believe that discourse analysis is somehow immune.

Another problematic aspect is that there may be a broader connection between the interest in discourse and postmodernist society – without claiming that the latter label captures the ‘essence’ (as there may not be one) of contemporary society, there may be a strong contemporary focus on surface performance, where labels, images, sales talk, and presentations dominate. One may talk of an economy of persuasion (Alvesson, forthcoming), where the skillful use of language for impressing others is vital for corporate, professional and individual success. Jackall (1988) notes that people in public relations and advertising can be seen as exemplars of postmodernism: ‘truth, what truth?’ The message is what counts, reality can be constructed in infinite number of ways, so stop worrying about trying to be truthful in describing it. It appears as if there is an affinity between the ‘discourse constitutes’ assumption and a discursive focus, and a relative disinterest in practices, meanings, relations, materiality beyond and beneath discourse. If language, action, practices, cognition and meanings are inseparable – a key assumption in much discourse analysis – then it seems sufficient to study the language part, and not worry about the rest. An interest in something ‘outside’ discourse can be dismissed as ‘positivism’ or embracing a language as a mirror of a reified reality view. Language captures it all and is also rather easy to study.
The rest of this article is disposed as follows: we start with a brief summary of ‘The varieties of discourse’ 2000 framework. We proceed with a critique of the two main perspectives that emerged from the framework, small d discourse and big D discourse, with a particular focus on the kind of reductionism inherent in each perspective. We also look into the present day status of organizational discourse analysis. After that we attempt to identify various ways to deal with the problems spelled out by our critique. We suggest counterbalancing concepts and rethinking muscularity as particularly viable responses.

Our 2000 framework: A summary

The 2000 article focuses on the distinctions between what is assumed about the formative range of discourse, and what is assumed regarding the relation between discourse and other aspects such as meaning in terms of the former’s possible constitutive powers. The framework makes it possible to distinguish between a variety of approaches to discourse and discourse analysis. There are two dimensions. One runs from micro-discourses – the details of social texts, including talk, in the local context – to macro level discourses, e.g. lines of reasoning and language addressing more or less standardized ways of constituting/reasoning about certain types of phenomena, e.g. business reengineering, diversity or globalization. The other points at views on the powers of discourse, where one endpoint (‘discourse autonomy’) indicates an interest in discourse without assuming anything about its effects or connections to ‘other phenomena’ or aspects and the other ‘marries’ discourse and ‘other phenomena’, assuming that discourse includes or constructs meanings, thinking, action, etc. The framework is summarized in Figure 1 (from Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000a).

The problem of reductionism in ODA: Small d discourse and big D discourse

We consider all four positions sketched below as legitimate starting points for analysis. However, when related to organizational issues, each position presents different analytical problems. The main reason for the problems lies in the tendencies for reductionism inherent in most cases of discourse analysis.

First, allow us to elaborate the different takes on discourse analysis discussed above. We will start with the micro-discourse approach, or small d discourse, as it is also known (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004; Jian et al., 2008, see also Kykyri et al., 2007a, 2007b for applications in organization studies). Potter and Wetherell (1987, 1994) provide a relatively pure, and well-reputed, version of it. They develop their version from the assumption that the social world is created bottom-up: people create and construct the social world through linguistic interaction (for a critique of the micro-discourse approach from a social-psychological perspective, see Hammersley, 2003, for a response see Potter, 2003). According to Potter and Wetherell, this is a three-stage process: First, people actively create accounts on a basis of previously existing linguistic resources. Second, they are continually and actively involved in selecting some of the infinite number of words and meaning constructions available, and in rejecting others. Third, the chosen construction has its consequences: the mode of expression has an effect, it influences ideas, generates responses and so on.
Small d discourse analysis starts from the following assumptions:

1. Language is used for a variety of functions and has a variety of consequences;
2. Language is both constructed and constructive;
3. The same phenomenon can be described in several different ways;
4. Consequently there will be considerable variations in the accounts of it;
5. There is no foolproof way yet of handling these variations or of distinguishing accounts that are ‘literal’ or ‘accurate’ from those which are rhetorical or incorrect, thus avoiding the problem of variation that faces researchers working with a more ‘realistic’ language model;
6. The constructive and flexible ways in which language is used should themselves be a central subject of study (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 35).

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<th>Close-range assumptions</th>
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**Figure 1.** Key dimensions and varieties of discourse positions
This approach mainly means ‘the study of talk and text in social practices’ (Fairhurst, 2007: 6). In order to avoid some of the confusion following from labeling almost everything discourse, we suggest that we refer to this kind of work as *text-focused studies*, in short TFS. This may remove the work some of its sexiness and the support associated with working with something as impressive-sounding, broad and significant as ‘discourse’, but the advantage in the form of clarity is worth pushing for.

**The small d discourse approach – a critique**

Potter and Wetherell clearly offer a contribution to our understanding of discursive interaction. However, the approach has severe limitations from an organizational analysis point of view. First, a strong focus on language use is far too exclusionary and simply missing too much (c.f. Hammersley, 2003; Reed, 2000, 2004). For example, studying strategy from this approach means to take an interest in the talk and communication of strategy produced in particular contexts and construction of executives as strategists; what linguistic moves informants make, how participants respond to each other’s moves, what stories they attempt to construct, how this is related to other stories, and so on and so forth.

According to the small d discourse approach (TFS), the possible existence of actual strategies – extra-linguistic ones, that is, those who are believed to in one way or another influence the operations of organizations – and the relation between talk on strategy and these presumed actual strategies is a non-issue. Since variation, inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies are to be expected in participants’ accounts on strategy, the way this shows up and is resolved in accounts is much more fruitful and enlightening to study than any unclear relation between these varied, inconsistent, and idiosyncratic accounts and actual strategies. Thus, from the DA point of view, organizations are particular contexts of talk. As such, they broadly prefigure what kind of accounts are possible to produce. Whatever they do more than that is nothing more than speculation. Phenomena such as the top management strengthening a sovereign-like position, suppliers being squeezed in asymmetrical relations of power, consumers being exposed to massive brand-upgrading campaigns, people made redundant and the environment suffering from the firm externalizing some of its costs as a result of strategies (to take a few potentially problematic outcomes of strategic management) become lost out of sight or downplayed (Levy et al., 2003; McCabe, 2010).

Second, Potter and Wetherell’s approach mystifies agency. For example, it could be argued that Potter and Wetherell claim that contextual contingencies are more important in determining how the conversation is going to develop, than, say, people’s psychological dispositions. The problem is that in their approach, almost everything – excluding (some) utterances, but including people’s psychological dispositions – could count as contextual contingencies. Potter and Wetherell don’t deliver a specific understanding of what they mean with the word context. For example, it is possible to identify six different uses of the word in their 1987 book (their index report 18 instances of the term):

- a) as something that is excluded from decontextualized principles (pp. 10, 14, 156);
- b) everything that’s beyond linguistic interaction (pp. 18, 23, 29, 54);
- c) as the generator of variation in utterances (pp. 33–35, 41, 58, 72–73, 126, 133);
Almost anything can count as context (Leitch and Palmer, 2010). But this also means that Potter and Wetherell are unable to provide a theory that tells us what is not included in the context. Since ‘context’ seems to be the element that brings agency and determination into Potter and Wetherell’s approach, they seems to offer an approach that neither provides a meaningful specification of its most important determining element, nor a way of constructing such a specification.

Advocates of Potter and Wetherell’s framework may respond that they do not claim to offer a theory on ‘everything’. They are only claiming to offer a better understanding of how everyday language works, and an analysis of how previous understandings of language have distorted our understanding of discursive interaction. From an organizational analysis point of view, however, the framework means that most issues – but not all – are lumped together and reduced to blackboxed ‘contextual contingencies’. The standard response from conversation and discourse analysts is that relevant parts of context are what actors invoke in talk or text, but thus gives often a highly limited and thin indication of broader organizational conditions. It is not just what happens in a conversation but how people think during and respond after the event that often matters most. People may, for example, respond seemingly approvingly to a manager’s talk – and then after the meeting pay careful attention, reinterpret it, downplay its importance, see it as an input to a joke, become upset when recalling it or totally disregard it. These responses are not necessarily articulated, but may be explored through observations of behaviour or interviews. Language use and meaning may not be aligned. It may be impossible or totally misleading to only pay attention to details in the conversation if one is interested in the broader context. Arguably, conversations are important in organizations (Taylor and Robichaud, 2004), but to limit context to what is invoked in specific conversations is too reductionist for organization studies.

**Big D discourse - the collapse of meaning into discourse**

At the other extreme in the framework, we find discourse analysis constructed as the identification and elaboration of what we call megadiscourses, or big D discourses (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004; Jian et al., 2008). This particular understanding of discourse, and discourse analysis, draws heavily on Foucault’s ideas on the matter, although sometimes authors see much ‘minor’ language material also as big D (e.g. an organization’s mission statement, in Coreen et al., 2007). Foucault understands discourses as bodies of knowledge, and thus expressions of power/knowledge-relations, ‘that systematically form the object of what they speak’ (Foucault, 1977: 49). Discourse in the Foucauldian sense is less about everyday linguistic interaction, and more about historically developed systems of ideas that forms institutionalized and authoritative ways of addressing a topic, to ‘regimes of truth’. A main point is that ‘power and
knowledge relations are established in culturally standardized Discourses formed by constellations of talk patterns, ideas, logics, and assumptions that constitute objects and subjects' (Fairhurst, 2007: 7). At the same time, generalized characterizations of discourse as ‘practices’ or ‘action’ are seen as valid also for this kind of work, without necessarily asking the question as to whether Foucault’s historical studies of mainly texts and plans aiming to find broader patterns have any distinct or specific connection to small d discourse studies. Of course, in one sense everything can be related, but is there a strong reason to connect Foucault and TFS apart from the use of the signifier ‘discourse’? The false identity or impression of similarity created by the label can easily lead to hidden confusion or sloppy thinking not being detected. In order to reduce the risk of exaggerating the links between possibly quite different phenomena gaining a seemingly unitary meaning through the signifier ‘discourse’ we suggest the use of the expression PDS (Paradigm-type Discourse Studies), which is then quite different from TFS. Of course PDS and TFS can be related – for a minimalist attempt to synthesize small d discourse and big D discourse, see Wetherell (1998) – but this is an empirical (not a definitional) question and the PDS-TFS link may not be stronger or more credible or more interesting to explore than any links to institutions, ideology, culture, management structures or whatever.

Another important question, in the context of management, work and organization, is if Foucault’s historical studies of thought systems can be directly translated into understandings of contemporary organizational phenomena. It is claimed that Discourse in this sense does not only shape our particular ways of talking about a subject matter, it also shapes and constitutes our understanding of the real on the experiential level: it informs us as to what is normal, natural, and true. Thus, both subjective and objective reality, in Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) sense, is constituted, constructed, and maintained through the particular discourses available in any given epoch.

Foucault has gathered quite a following in organizational analysis, including Knights and Morgan’s (1991) work on strategy as discourse, Townley’s (1993) Foucauldian reinterpretation of Human Resource Management; Deetz’s (1992) and Alvesson’s (1996) analysis of disciplinary power at the workplace; Grey’s (1994) reading of career development in professional organizations; Clegg’s (1989) conceptualization of power in organizations; Du Gay et al.’s (1996) analysis of the emergence of the competent manager; and Knights and Willmott’s reinterpretations of labor processes (c.f. Knights and Willmott, 1989; Willmott, 1994). Undeniably, Foucault’s work is original, thought-provoking, and occasionally deeply troubling. It provides a rich source of both inspiration and conceptual innovations that surely will prove fruitful for social science as a whole.

It is, however, not the philosopher’s stone of social science. From an organizational analysis point of view, perhaps the biggest drawback with Foucauldian discourses is that they are claimed to constitute reality – not only in its ideational dimension, but also in its practical-behavioral dimension – yet without being able to spell out how – and perhaps even if – this actually happens. In other words, the Foucauldian take on discourses does not include a clear idea on how discourse influences people to act in the prescribed way. On the one hand, it seems as if individuals are only embodied appendices of various discourses that have constituted the subjectivity the observer may think that s/he observes. On the other hand, Foucault empathetically underscored the individual’s possibility to exercise resistance, thereby implying the possibility of choice (c.f. Foucault, 1977). A
major problem with much Foucault-inspired work is that it takes for granted that Discourses have these effects and then sets out to demonstrate this. ‘Organizational Discourse studies are interested in showing how Discourse constitute workers’ subjec-
tivities, establishes and naturalizes managerial control, and disciplines the productive body’ (Jian et al., 2008: 306). Consequently, there is a wealth of studies examining manage-
ment texts and then showing the validity of Foucauldian ideas (e.g. Knights and Morgan, 1991; Townley, 1993), but these studies draw mainly upon investigations of text-
books and other writings, and not on empirical studies of managerial practices. But rather
than ‘showing’, in the sense of being determined to demonstrate that one’s framework is
correct/productive, one could perhaps suggest a more open and curious orientation, aiming
to investigate if Discourse does all it is assumed to do. Most authors referring to
Foucault do seem to be quite committed to the framework and apply and/or demonstrate
it (e.g. Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008). Occasionally one gets the impression that Discourse
is the thought and action system within which it all occurs; if one then finds something
that departs or deviates from it then, per definition, another Discourse must do the trick.

As Newton (1994) has shown (in a more open-ended study), the proposition that discourses effortlessly constitute reality appears to be counterfactual. In his analysis of the
development and implementation of assessment centers by the UK army during the
Second World War it is quite clear that the rationalistic discourse surrounding the install-
ment of assessment centers for officer recruitment never really accomplished a change in
the criteria for recruitment:

\[
[t]\text{he . . . analysis show[s] that it is unlikely that individuals will exhibit a straightforward}
\text{adherence to terms of the discourse. Instead, military practice appeared to deliberately subvert}
\text{the terms of the personnel psychology discourse by including ‘subjective’ factors such as those}
\text{relating to ‘bearing’, ‘dash’ and decisions based on ‘impressions’ and the ‘personality’ of the}
\text{selectors, all [of] which have no place according to the logic of the classical selection model.}
\text{(Newton, 1994: 893)}
\]

The Foucauldian interpretation would, of course, be that a) recruiters exercised resist-
ance, and b) that the personnel psychology discourse failed to become operational only
shows how strongly the previous ‘public school chap’ discourse has determined the
recruiter’s subjectivities. But such a defense only highlights the Foucauldian fram-
work’s inability to account for how and why certain discourses tend to stick while other
discourses don’t. If one claims that recruiters in the example above both exercised resist-
ance (towards one particular discourse) and adherence (to another discourse), then it
seems as if one, in fact, says that resistance is only a word that denotes what happens
when one discourse fights off another. To interpret resistance in this way clearly robs
much of the subtlety and sophistication in Foucault’s use of the word. Indeed, Foucault
claimed that the subject-constitutive capacity in discourses lies as much in the subject’s
resistance to it as their acceptance of it. However, as Newton (1994) points out:

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[t]\text{here is little explanation in Foucault’s work of why and how people may ‘elaborate’, ‘resist’}
or manipulate the discourse, and in consequence there is only a partial account of the process
by which people ‘exercise power’. If discourse provide a basis upon which ‘subjectivity itself is constructed’ (Knights and Morgan, 1991: 5), then we have a theory of subjectivity which}
\text{leaves out the subject. (Newton, 1994: 893–894)}
\]
A related problem is that resistance is also an outcome of discourse. What people do is thus – from the perspective of Foucauldian discourse analysis – either ‘positively’ or negatively an outcome of a discourse in operation. Again, here we have a major problem in a lot of discourse studies: a tendency to connect discourse and what it constitutes by definition and so tightly that any outcome is directly explained or understood as a discursive effect. As pointed out above, there is a strong interest in the ‘constructive or performative effects of discourse’ (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004: 154), taken for granted rather than openly explored. Kuhn et al. (2008) ‘examine how the capitalist spirit’s conception of meaningfulness is discursively constructed’ (p. 163). A key concept they use is discursive resource, ‘a concept, phrase, expression, trope, or other linguistic device that a) is drawn from practices or texts, b) is designed to affect other practices or texts, c) explains past or present actions and d) provides a horizon for future practices’ (p. 163). The authors then conclude that ‘the Discourses and the discursive resources shaping the meaning(s) of work shows how Discourses, and the discursive resources they shape, produce a complex conception of work’s meaningfulness’ (p. 167). There are several problems here. One is that it appears as doubtful if a concept, phrase, expression or trope can accomplish all of what is included in a) to d). Another is that theory or ideology are well established (and better) concepts for accomplishing at least some parts of all this. More crucial is that the article does not really show anything about the role of Discourses and the discursive resources as the powerful impact is already in the definition of these.

Newton’s study is not the only one implying the need for considerable caution before stating too much of what Discourse accomplishes. In our own research we often find (getting a strong empirically supported impression) that complex organizations are not easily transformed or constructed objects for Discourses. We typically engage in a kind of ethnography – open-ended and exploratory studies of what the people under study think they are up to – that owes to Geertz’s (1973) ideal of thick descriptions. The research design is sensitive to language but not limited to a discourse focus (either in a TFS or a PDS version) that tends to indicate a spectrum of outcomes in terms of the formative capacity of discourse. For example, in one study leadership discourse managers demonstrated great use of leadership vocabulary and drew upon this in their presentations of themselves, but it did not seem to influence their practices very much (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). The discourse looks impressive on paper and is echoed in superficial accounts of what the managers say they believe in, but their managerial work is much more influenced by administrative demands than efforts to enact any leader identity. Studies of HRM discourse in text and policies (Keenoy, 2009; Townley, 1993) give a quite different impression from research on HRM in specific organizational contexts (Alvesson and Kårreman, 2007; Townley, 1999).

Other researchers, sometimes unwittingly, detect similar patterns. Musson and Duberley (2007) studied a firm where the discourse of participation was used to create change among supervisors. The response to this was very varied, complex and inconsistent. The authors conclude that resistance took many forms, managerial attempts to exercise power through a particular discourse ‘can only ever be partial, because discourses are never completely cohesive’ (pp. 160–161). The authors ‘see a picture where identities are constructed within a mesh of discourses drawn from a variety of social contexts’ and that ‘attempts at managing subjectivity to regulate and control identity through participation
programmes should be seen as a highly complex activity, the results of which are largely unpredictable’ (p. 162). Here, whatever response that seems to appear is linked to ‘a mesh of discourses’, but this can be seen as an expression of the researchers’ inclination to overlay the discourse card (explaining everything) rather than to use the concept to explore (the limitations of) its constitutive powers. The authors claim that organizations are ‘constructed primarily through the production of texts’ (p. 145) and discourses make certain ways of thinking and acting possible, and others impossible or costly. Like Superman, discourses are capable of everything (almost): ‘If discourses can define a topic, they can also define a role and a person’ (Musson and Duberley, 2007: 146). But then the authors also claim: ‘we are constrained as well as enabled by material conditions, cultural traditions and relations of power’ (p. 147). Whether these qualities are somehow expressions of discourses or something else that ‘competes’ with discourses in making things possible or impossible is unclear, but one could argue that ‘material conditions, cultural traditions and relations of power’ are not necessarily best subsumed under an all-embracing discourse or text idea and that these possibly mattered more than discourses for the rather weak or partial impact of the participation discourse.

A somewhat different aspect concerns the possible discrepancy between language use and meaning. Sometimes these are married (e.g. Oswick, 2010: 104): ‘Discourse is a process of meaning-making through talk and text’. However, conversation and similar language use do not guarantee shared meaning. Dougherty (1996) studied people from various departments in a firm having intensive conversations and using the same vocabulary but still failed to arrive at shared meanings about an innovation project. On the other hand, there are also cases in line with ‘discursivist’ beliefs, demonstrating how a new discourse on the character of corporate work may lead to subjectivity-shaping effects; for example, a group of internal support staff redefining themselves as consultants leading to relatively far reaching changes in views of self and work (Deetz, 1998). Our case is certainly not to dismiss the idea of the possible constitute powers of discourse, but this call for open-minded inquiry, not programmatic reproduction and confirmation.

On the whole, it is perhaps common that strategy, HRM, leadership, participation, etc, Discourses have some, but modest or partial, impact. Resistance as an integral element in Discourse, or the operations of other Discourses, may of course explain the lack of full impact; but in complex organizations, full of activities, work processes, people, groups, relations, goals, subgoals, interests, cultures, subcultures, garbage-can-like decision processes, etc., allowing no space for anything else than Discourse is highly reductionistic. Our point is not that all this needs to be studied, but any assessment and study of Discourse should be careful to not blow up Discourse to The Explanation, but rather to be sensitive to and curious about empirical indications that the constitutive powers of Discourse may be limited. Perhaps there are Discourses about Quality, Knowledge, Diversity, Equal Opportunity, Visions and Our Values that people in organizations, other than senior managers, HRM and consultants having written the policy documents and doing the power point presentations, could not care less about, apart from perhaps in formal meetings about these? And perhaps responses – from partial acceptance to fierce resistance to indifference – may be productively interpreted in non-discourse terms?

To sum up, although the PDS approach provides an economical and elegant way of thinking on the productive and formative forces that shapes the social, it does so only by
reducing away those who actually produce and form it, who may or may not be discourse-driven. This is less problematic if one studies the history of the development of social forces – as Foucault primarily did – since history always start from a perspective when actors already have chosen, and their actual choices can be recorded and interpreted. History can be reinterpreted, but it cannot be undone. However, such reduction is unacceptable if one studies history in the making. Without an adequate understanding of those performing history – their options, their choices, and their ways of reaching a conclusion – their actions will always look predetermined, if only by the fact that it is possible to construct an intelligible and patterned reconstruction of their actions. It will seem as if discourse determined this or discourse determined that, when, in fact, the main – and sometimes only – reason things looks decided from discourse is because it is assumed. What takes place in organizations cannot be predicted from ideas about discourse coming from studies of textbooks, policy documents and similar.

**Present day ODA: Healthy pluralism or messy confusion?**

Some have tried to overcome reductionism in DA by pointing out that actual discourse in organizations plays out on both the level of small d discourse and big D discourse (e.g. Conrad, 2004; Cooren et al., 2007; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004). Cooren et al. (2007: 155), for example, ‘assume that a given Discourse – in our case, MSF’s mission statement – must, by definition, be embodied, materialized or even incarnated in discourses, that is, tokens of text or talk, in order for it to be reproduced, sustained and transported from one point to another.’ Others have chosen to redefine the concept of discourse to better fit the particular research problem at hand. The latter strategy has created problems in its own right. The expansion of organizational discourse has led to an enormous diversity of what is labeled organizational discourse and/or what are included in various collections of texts with this label.

For some this is mainly positive and a sign of healthy pluralism. Grant et al. (2004: 2) see ‘the diversity of approaches and perspectives as indicative of organizational discourse as a plurivocal project and argue that such an approach is the best way of ensuring that the field makes a meaningful contribution to the study of organizations’. Others are less happy about the variation and find the ‘multifarious meanings of discourse to be confusing and ambiguous’ (Jian et al., 2008: 299) and that this may ‘lead to confusion, compromise theoretical and methodological rigour, and creates hurdles for healthy dialogue’ (p. 301) (see also Leitch and Palmer, 2010).

The impression is that discourse scholars incorporate a wide body of quite disparate work in an all-embracing category of discourse studies (Rhodes, 2005). This is, as we see it, unfortunate as it clouds awareness of different analytical and theoretical options. Of course, organizational discourse to some extent shares this with other popular areas (or labels); for example, leadership, institution, identity, knowledge, etc. But this is of little comfort and no excuse not to address problems being created. Discourse scholars sometimes use very broad definitions of discourse that overpacks the concept, makes it clumsy to use and – in particular – leads to problems in thinking and investigating in a nuanced way what actually happens when ‘discourse’ is at play. We have thus two additional
worries, apart from reductionism, about the field(s) of organizational discourse: overpacking and colonization.

According to Grant et al. (2004) organizational discourse ‘refers to the structured collection of texts embodied in the practices of talking and writing (as well as a wide variety of visual representations and cultural artefacts) that bring organizationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated and consumed’ (p. 3). Texts can mean quite a lot. Almost the same author group also say that ‘the texts that populate discourses range from written work to speech acts to non-linguistic symbols and images’ (Hardy et al., 2005: 61) and they consider that ‘discursive resources – understandings, frames of reference, and forms of knowledge, or as we call them “constructions” – are similar to Swidler’s (1986) conception of culture as “tool kit”’ (p. 66). This seems broad-ranging and complicated, but it becomes possibly worse when discourse is connected to something else (or added-on), like interaction, practice, meaning or whatever; for example, ‘discursively constructed meanings that reside in our minds’ (Grant et al., 2004: 23). ‘[T]hese conversations discursively produce and maintain certain forms of knowledge’ (Hardy et al., 2005: 66). Kuhn et al. (2008) see ‘cultural forces shaping and conditioning these linguistic choices’ as Discourses (p. 165), i.e. culture is turned into Discourses.

Fairhurst (2007) also defines ‘discursive approaches’ widely and includes ‘subjectivity, identities, relationships, cultures and linguistic communities, organizations as macroactors, linguistic repertoires, and Discourses as stand-alone systems of thought’ (p. 9). In another wide-ranging attempt, Fairclough (1993), for example, suggests that any discursive event is analysed on the basis of its being ‘simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice’ (quoted in Grant et al., 2001: 7). Van Dijk (1993) remarks that discourse can be seen as a way of thinking. Taylor and Robichaud (2004) refer to discourses as ‘text’ that is then ‘discursively based interpretations defining agents, purposes and organizations’ (p. 395). A text ‘frames conversations and reflects the sensemaking practices and habits of interpretations of organizational members’ (p. 395). Clegg (1989) goes further and includes ““discursive practices”: practices of talk, text, writing, cognition, argumentation, and representation generally” (p. 151).

Discourse thus seems to be stretched to incorporate almost everything; easily: a) increasing the confusion between authors and texts about the endless possibilities of the meaning(s) of discourse; and b) creating problems of focus, coherence and possibility of making meaningful claims also within specific text. In particular, this means that relationships between various elements become difficult: as discourse includes everything there is an inclination to assume that everything somehow hangs together, an inclination strongly reinforced by the credo that discourse constitutes, i.e. per definition creates effects. This stipulated high-muscularity leads to insensitivity if not denial of alternatives to discourse – apart from very far away approaches such as positivism and others that assume that discourse ‘simply’ reflects reality. But within a language-sensitive set of views, there are many alternatives and it may be productive to not, as with some of the authors above, drown and reduce, for example, culture to be a subordinated part of discourse, but compare and contrast discursive and cultural approaches.
Remedies: Counter-balancing concepts and relativizing muscularity

We suggest three ways to strengthen the analytical power of ODA that attempt to avoid the problems of reductionism, overpacking and colonization: disconnecting discourse and Discourse, counter-balancing concepts and relativizing muscularity. We addressed the first idea above – suggesting that treating talk/text and paradigm-type Discourse studies should be addressed separately and not be overpacked in a broad-brushed concept of discourse. The second way means using distinctly also non-discourse concepts. The third focuses on cutting down the concept of discourse in size, without necessarily balancing it with other concepts. As we addressed the first idea above, we now deal with the other two.

Counter-balancing concepts

At the heart of this strategy lies the realization that the analytical value of the concept of discourse actually diminishes if one allows it to be all-encompassing. Thus, if we allow discourse to be defined in a way that it shapes every aspect of social reality, it provides very little information about the various ways in which this happens. Rather, it is stipulated that discourse has vague but yet very powerful ways of shaping reality. A more fruitful way of understanding how discourse takes part in social reality is to assume that there are more things at play than just discourse. As expressed by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2010), ‘we should keep a constant analytical focus not just upon discourse as such, but on the relations between discourse and other social elements’ (p. 1215, italics in original). For example, Ferraro et al. (2005) address the issue of theories having truth effects, i.e. becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. This may sound Foucault-like and invite a discourse study, but the authors do not refer to Foucault or use the term discourse. Instead, in dealing with the problematic aspects of economic theories producing truth effects – like the assumption of individuals maximizing their self-interest leading to people doing that – they look at three ways in which this may be accomplished: through language, social norms and institutions.

One could of course argue that all this is Discourse or captured through a sufficiently broad concept of discourse also incorporating social norms and institutions. However, one could suggest that social norms and institutions are also constructed in other ways than indicated by a language-oriented concept of Discourse. Social norms can be assumed to be tacit and culturally taken-for-granted and produced/reproduced through people observing how others behave, picking up very subtle guidelines and sanctions as to how to act. Institutions are also produced and reproduced through material and social arrangements, legislations, in addition to norms and language. In this sense, it is more fruitful to assume that a discourse needs to be anchored in, and supported by, social norms and institutions to have a clear constitutive effect. Ferraro et al. (2005) also point at how cultures and accountability mediate the impact of the theories. This indicates some of the elements needing to be in place for discourses (both TFS and PDS) to do the trick – backup in the form of something other than discourse is necessary for the constitutive effect to appear. Mumby and Clair (1997) express a similar position when emphasizing the need
to consider the relationship between discourse, ideology and power, arguing that ‘there are no one-to-one, fixed relationships between discourse, what it means, how it functions ideologically, and the effects of power’ (p. 187).

A second example of counter-balancing is Alvesson’s (2004) distinction between organizational culture and organizational discourse. Culture indicates an interest in broadly shared meanings and symbolism, often partly or fully taken-for-granted. Language is central in producing culture, but discourse can often be seen as expressing/revealing ‘deeper’ meanings that have been developed over time and have ‘been there’ prior to a particular linguistic act. But there are also other elements than language – material practices and conditions, non-verbal aspects of social interaction, etc. – active in culture production and reproduction. Culture provides a subtext to language use – a prestructured understanding. The same discourse (language use) in different cultures (meaning contexts) may lead to different receptions and thus meanings.

Discourse indicates specific use of language, structuring a chunk of the world in a particular way. Discourse, when being highly-potent, frames and constitutes identity and elements in subjectivity through specific communicative acts and thus expresses micro power. Language, to a lesser extent, refers to or expresses already existing cultures as creating meaning. The discourse-driven nature of meaning implies its temporal character.

A cultural view would not assume any distinct effects of Discourse, more or less irrespective of local context, but take seriously that a variety of meanings are possible. Discourses – both with a capital and a lower-case d (relabeled PDS and TFS above) – are ordered and integrated by cultures, but also represent a (perhaps even the most important) medium in which cultures are constructed, reproduced, contested and changed. In discourse, ideologies and other cultural elements are developed, modified and expressed. It is at this level that the subject is ‘hit’ by linguistic acts carrying and applying cultural themes and more or less elaborated or fragmented ideologies.

Maguire and Hardy (2006) provide a third example of counter-balancing concepts, in creating a framework focusing on the interplay between discourse and institutions. They argue that discourses and institutions interplay, and cannot be collapsed into one another. In their analysis, discourse provides the necessary framing for institutions to emerge by stabilizing meaning, while institutions stabilize collective action and provide frameworks for action and practices. The combination of discourse and institutions in their framework balances out the tendency to explain ‘everything’ in either discursive or institutional terms. Selsky et al. (2003) provides a similar argument. In their analysis the variety of discourses that emerged around an industrial action incident were primarily framed by the institutional make-up of the event. Hence, in this case, discourse and institutions balance each other, but with the added twist that institutions primarily frame the emergent discourses, and not the other way around.

A fourth version of counter-balancing concepts can be found in Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) where discourse is primarily used as a methodological device to cast light on the phenomenon of work place resistance. Although discourse plays an important role in the analysis, it is not used as a main analytical concept, but as a way of organizing how organizational members talk about ambition and autonomy, and how this feeds in to patterns of resistance. Hence, the over-packing and colonizing tendencies in the
concept of discourse are counteracted by using a framework that downplays the framing effects of discourse.

For researchers into a ‘monopolistic’ and reductionistic understanding of discourse as the (only) way of understanding phenomena, going ‘outside’ discourse may sound impossible or odd. And we do not propose testing a hypothesis of the impact of discourse or the strictly descriptive use of language. Interpretive empirical studies can try to study discourses or discursive practices (specific Discourses, linguistic symbols, stories or conversations) and be open about how to produce sensitive descriptions (representations, constructions) without necessarily privileging discourse as the best or only way of labelling/conceptualizing the empirical material. Geertzian (1973) thick description, for example, provides an illuminating counter-example of multifaceted and rich forms of textual analysis, compared with the, relatively speaking, thin descriptions provided by conversation analysis and garden variety PDS organizational discourse analysis.

**Relativizing muscularity**

Discourse can, to use our ironic concept in Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a), be seen as more or less ‘muscular’. Most advocates of organizational discourse emphasize heavily the ‘muscles’ of discourse; for example: ‘the world into which we are born is structured by the discourse of organizations’ (Kilduff and Kelemen, 2004: 259). Whether the text has an autonomous, stable or structural status can perhaps be debated, but this is not encouraged by the cited authors. Perhaps this de-stabilization of stuff outside text means a robustification of what has been focused instead: ‘the problem of language as a “mirror of nature” that preoccupied the positivists was replaced by simply focusing on the mirror as an object’ (Deetz, 2003: 425). Similarly, discourse advocates firmly establish that ‘conversation, framed within a material/social and a language environment, is the site where organizing occurs’ (Taylor and Robichaud, 2004: 410). Apparently, there is no doubt about this. The key point of many communication and discourse studies is the idea that language use creates or constitutes reality and that discourse (as conversation) does the organizing. This is sometimes insightful, but sometimes it is a less relevant or productive point (see, for example, Cooren, 2004 on what texts can and cannot do).

‘Constitutes’ covers a wide spectrum of various analytical options and possible empirical claims. This is seldom explored. The constitutive powers of discourse may be seen as the vital, powerful element in reality construction. ‘Reality’ — behaviours, practices, meanings, talk — out there is ambiguous, ‘weak’ and offers only a general and soft input to the discourse user (or the Discourse working ‘above’ the subject), who in return, through words used, has a strong and distinct impact on this reality, shaped by discourse. But discourse may also be seen as medium-strong — social reality (as practices) or cultural and individual mindsets (or deeply anchored meanings) may show considerable resistance against most efforts to constitute reality in specific ways through talk and text, although there are some variations and options. Or reality may be quite robust — we may want to constitute, for example, ‘knowledge society’ as much as we want in talk and text, but other aspects of working life may render such ideas irrelevant and moot. As Sturdy and Fleming (2003) express it ‘While we know the world mostly in terms of words/ideas we cannot simply talk up new worlds’ (p. 759). It also seems misleading to focus solely
on the constitutive powers of language use and discourse. Language and discourse presumably do other things too. They frame, connect, suggest, inform and instruct, to mention some of the possibilities. In particular, connective and instructive uses of language and discourse seems to be systematically down-played with a strict focus on the constitutive capacity of discourse.

Within organization studies, many authors emphasize how multiple logics characterize their objects of studies. Meyer and Rowan (1977) pointed at how organizations develop structures that correspond to institutionalized myths but are disconnected from production. Pfeffer (1981) views discourse as symbolic action influencing faith and legitimation but having no or limited impact on the ‘substance’ producing results. Brunsson (2003) argues that contemporary organizations, exposed to demands from several groups and expected to fulfill a variety of legitimation roles plus deliver the goods, are characterized by hypocrisy: talk, decision and action are decoupled and the three go often in different directions. That the talk-other stuff distinction is often problematic and may mean an insensitivity to language use should not discourage openness about possible separability.

This does not eliminate the irreducible dimension of meaning – that reality always is revealed in a figurative manner. The layer of discursively carried meaning is powerful in many ways, but it is not all there is. In this sense critical realists are right in pointing out the pitfalls of the epistemic fallacy – the fact that the knowledge of reality necessarily is discursive does not mean that the nature of reality is (Fairclough, 2005; Reed, 2004) – although, contra critical realists, it seems excessive to suggest that realities never can be purely discursive, but must be anchored in some other ‘reality’. The layer of meaning may always be important, and it may in some instances be the most important thing or even the only thing, but this is far from always the case. For example, cars, bridges, houses, machines, and meals rely on more things than imaginary meaning: for example, on concrete, steel, foodstuff or other materials. They also rely on performances for their actual construction: on welding, brick-laying, cooking and other forms of work. Their constitution is more a matter of materiality and performances than of meanings and words. In this case, words and meanings are more likely to facilitate the constitution of actual cars and bridges by the connective and instructive properties of language. This is also true for certain less material entities, such as the performance of services and rituals. Take, for example, services like the cleaning of a house or activities like hiring or firing employees. Words are important for understanding what cleaning is all about but the actual performance is likely to be performed without a word. And hiring or firing decisions clearly involve words but also understandings about how complex institutions and social organizing works, and the actual implementation of these institutions.

Having said that, the hiring or firing of employees is different. Words may be insufficient for this to happen but they are necessary. Words are doing important work during hiring practices. Hiring and firing demands the use of a particular vocabulary. After all, it is a mechanism for changing the social status among certain people. This change is almost exclusively done by words. It is accomplished through a particular vocabulary used by people with particular and socially recognized roles. Thus, complex social relations are constituted and legitimized. Even though words (sometimes) get things done, firing people may be better grasped through referring to legal and structural arrangements,
cognitions and material consequences than paying nuanced attention to language use. If an employment situation is framed as a person is fired, made redundant, strongly encouraged to apply for a position elsewhere, the employment contract is to be discontinued, losing the job or whatever may lead to some fine-grained variation in the subjective response, but may matter less than the substantive change.

The discussion above has implications on the distinction between text-focused studies (TFS) and paradigm-type discourse studies (PDS). In cases where materiality and extra-discursive practices plays a significant role, like in cooking and assembling a car or a bridge, discourses arguably tend to be of interest from a TFS analysis point of view. The proper place for communication analysis in these cases is about the structure and content of the conversations that occur around these objects and performances. Although we would argue that it is a stretch to think that these objects and performances primarily are constituted through communicative processes, the analysis of communicative processes embedding them certainly would tell us important things about how they operate in social reality.

TFS would also generally be helpful for understanding cases where words are doing the main job. In many ways, the value and importance of discourse analysis has been established through the analysis of the performative aspects of language use (see e.g. Craig and Armenic, 2004; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Sturdy and Fleming, 2003): when language clearly is used to accomplish things in highly localized settings (interactions). This is probably the area of analysis where what we previously referred to as small letter discourse analysis has the greatest potential, and also has few competing analytical tools.

PDS, on the other hand, is suitable for the analysis of ideational phenomena on an abstract level. As Foucault has demonstrated, this analytical perspective is a powerful way of understanding the history and the sociology of ideas (although Foucault’s analysis of power probably is more telling regarding the sociology of ideas). In a way, it could be argued that the pure meanings of words also have performative effects, that they in fact also do things in the world. We think that this is correct to some extent, but we think that the meaning side of words has a different type of agency in comparison with the performative side of words. In the first case the agency lies in the framing effect of the meaning the words carry. In the second case, meaning is secondary, and the agency lies in actually sequencing the words, thus connecting events rather than framing them.

Discourse analysts often seem to emphasize that discourse has a lot of muscle mass – although different muscular discourses may neutralize each other or create uncertain effects. We are not so sure. Discourse may make a difference – however, this muscularity cannot be assumed but needs to be demonstrated. A greater interest in language use in social context and a stronger attention to the responsiveness to discourse can be a way forward. Here responsiveness would include much more than words uttered in response to others in conversations, i.e. effects on feelings, identities, norms, priorities, actions, etc. In this sense, discourse can have a variety of effects, going from nonexistent or very little muscularity, to create the world as we know it:

- Discourse is ephemeral talk – language use has no significant constitutive agency, apart from communicating transient meaning;
- Discourse varnishes – the discourse is a minor, final moment of naming something that makes a certain difference in terms of attention-shaping, agenda-setting and sometimes action-implying;
• Discourse gestures – something out there is placed in a new context and, as figure forms ground, meaning is revised and subjectivity affected;
• Discourse connects – discourse provides terminals for avenues of meanings, thus making it possible to connect social elements;
• Discourse instructs – discourse provides templates for action, with actual agency residing outside discourse (c.f. the relationship between recipes and actual dishes);
• Discourse frames – something is preformed, but in a not entirely accessible (presentable) way, via discourse this something gets its shape;
• Discourse produces – discourse provides most of the constitutive agency in recreating social reality;
• Discourse creates – discourse provides (almost) all the constitutive agency in creating changes in social reality.

Consequently, we have a spectrum of positions from ‘just talk and text’ that may be related (or unrelated) to other phenomena in any number of ways to Harry Potter-like magic – the right words are uttered and the world changes accordingly. There may be a fascination for Harry Potter among some academics devoted to discourse (and living in a world where text and talk matter more than for bus drivers, carpenters and factory managers), but the magic of the expression ‘discourse constitutes’ probably needs to be backed up with a bit more precision and openness for empirical inquiry and/or balanced with other ideas and concepts indicating other aspects (thinking, materiality, cultural taken for granted assumptions, meaning patterns . . .) also having a say in what is constituting something.

Conclusion

Despite some critique against how the concept of discourse is often (over-)used, this article should not be read as dismissal of the idea that language use is crucial in organization. Our take is one of a sympathetic critic, eager to promote a more nuanced and sharp use of a language-sensitive understanding of organizations. As discourse can mean almost anything it is not easy to address the topic(s) of this article. We are well aware that every time we try to say something with a broader relevance the informed reader may associate to a few texts that represent exceptions. But the idea with this article is to critically and perhaps provocatively reflect on organizational discourse as a field, its ‘mainstream’ (fairly typical examples), and not to map all the variation in a fine-tuned way (see e.g. Grant et al., 2004; Putnam and Fairhurst, 2001 for such efforts).

A key idea in most discourse texts is that language does not ‘simply reflect’ but constitutes, which makes sense, at least sometimes. It also – at least sometimes – makes sense to claim that language does not ‘simply’ constitutes reality, but also connects, frames and instructs, and perhaps (only) reflects (or distorts) it or is (simply) unrelated to other parts of reality (practices, behaviours, meanings, feelings, cognitions, values). It is common that people in organizations refer to discourse such as new corporate values as ‘just talk and paper’ (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2008). The loading of language with strong muscularity as a general assumption and claim is problematic. The power of language needs to be openly and reflexively investigated, not just assumed and – as a
self-evident fact – ‘simply’ demonstrated. All intellectual projects benefit from critical scrutiny, in particular concerning the dominating assumptions. Many discourse studies proceed from the assumption of the inseparability of language-meaning-cognition-action-practice. Sometimes this is a taken-for-granted assumption to be uncritically reproduced rather than a potentially productive idea to reflect upon and selectively use, considering the possibility of language being separable or loosely connected to the non-linguistic; and then – realizing the methodological problems – being curious about what is happening in organizations. Discourse is a potentially valuable concept here, but needs to be used in more discriminating ways than is often the case.

Part of the problem is the constitution of a field of discourse studies. The only thing that unites much discourse work is the use of the term discourse. In one sense this is obvious and less of a problem, but it tends to reduce awareness of options and create confusion. It also seems to cover up muddled thinking and allow authors to take for granted links that need to be critically examined. We have the feeling that the common (over)use of the signifier discourse may lead to a somewhat uncritical tendency to mix an interest in the details of talk and text with references to Discourses in a Foucauldian sense. Sometimes this means a vague and confused drifting between different meanings of discourse, sometimes a move between different clearly recognized views on discourse without considering the problems of such moves and an assumption that discourses and Discourses form natural bedfellows. Say discourse and people assume a field – or a set of practices with something in common – and some vague expectation that things somehow hang together and that people in it should know and refer to the discourse literature, but not necessarily other literatures (unless motivated by the specific subject matter, identity, strategy or whatever).

In this article we have identified three particular problems prevalent in current ODA: reductionism, overpacking and colonization. We have suggested the general ambition to produce thick, rather than thin, descriptions in Geertz’ (1973) sense and, more specifically, three analytical strategies to overcome these problems: disconnecting discourse and Discourse, counter-balancing concepts and relativizing muscularity. In order to support the first strategy we have suggested two new concepts as a way of getting beyond the problems of inflated discourses on discourse: text-focused studies (TFS) and paradigm-type discourse studies (PDS) are perhaps words/meanings that better indicate what people are addressing when talking about discourse than small letter d and capital letter D. The suggestion to distinguish between small and capital letters discourse in Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a) was perhaps here not very helpful as it gave the impression that here was an easy way to separate and integrate phenomena or aspects that perhaps really called for quite different approaches and hard work to connect. Incorporating too much is a considerable problem in specific studies and uses of the idea of discourse. We thus make a proposal for a less colonializing approach: cut the concept of discourse down in size, assume less, cover less, reveal more and allow a clearer space for other approaches and vocabularies, i.e. use counter-balancing concepts. In other words, do not rely too much on an all embracing concept of discourse. Important for students interested in discourse (or how to label the topic) is to develop a stronger interest in open inquiry rather than reproduction of taken-for-granted assumptions of a discourse-driven world or that talk is the most important thing going on in organizations, i.e. relativize the assumption
of the centrality and powers of discourse. A similar lesson is certainly valid for many other streams than discourse, where hot and sexy terms attract a lot of attention, but this does not reduce the relevance in the context addressed here.

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**References**


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