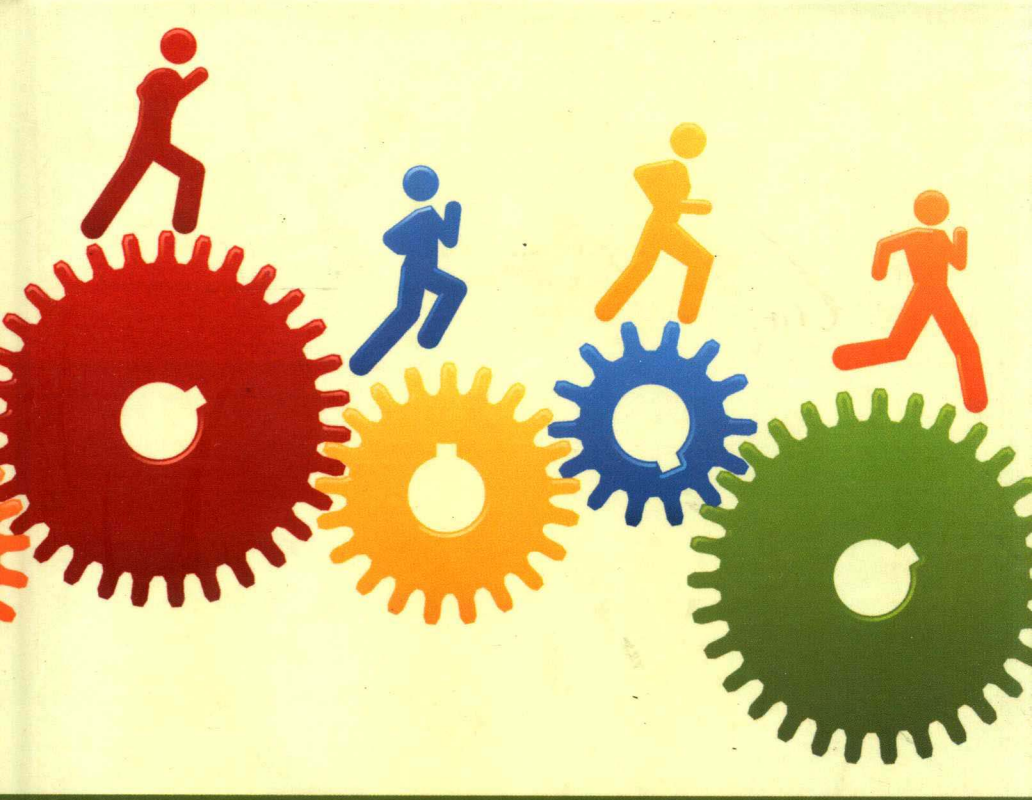

# DISPLAYING COMPETENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

## Discourse Perspectives

Edited by Katja Pelsmaekers, Craig Rollo, Tom Van Hout and Priscilla Heynderickx

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Edited by

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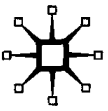

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# 1

# Discourse Perspectives on Competence in Organizations

*Tom Van Hout, Katja Pelsmaekers, Priscilla Heynderickx and Craig Rollo*

In their review of organizational discourse research, Grant and Iedema (2005) distinguish between two traditions: organizational discourse studies and organizational discourse analysis. The former is rooted in management and organization theory, the latter derives from work in theoretical and applied linguistics. While both traditions share an interest in the complexities of institutional life and in the application of discourse analysis to grasp those complexities, the authors note a lack of cross-fertilization between the two traditions. Acting on this observation, Grant and Iedema map the scientific conversations that are taking place in the organizational discourse studies literature.

The authors carve up the organizational discourse studies literature using five binary dimensions. The first dimension contrasts studies that prioritize theoretical discussions about abstract organizational principles with studies that privilege empirical data to make claims about discourse processes, practices and patterns. The second dimension involves analytical scope and distinguishes between work that takes a monomodal approach to meaning (e.g. the role of language in organizations) and studies which see meaning as a multimodal phenomenon (e.g. human–computer interaction). The third dimension contrasts organizational discourse research that analyses discourse as observable, patterned behaviour with studies that highlight discourse as a site for engendering organizational change and innovation. The fourth dimension draws a line between the idea that human thought determines discourse (discourse as cognition) and the notion that discourse indexes ways of doing and saying (discourse as social practice). Grant and Iedema's fifth and final dimension discerns between critical and interventionist research. The former applies discourse analysis to critique forms of organizational power while the

latter privileges discourse analysis as a means to achieve organizational change.

Taking a cue from Grant and Iedema's literature review, the research presented in this book continues the conversation between organizational discourse studies and organizational discourse analysis, but rather than identifying commonalities and divergences in one strand of organizational discourse research and publishing it in a journal targeted at a different scholarly audience, this book illustrates how work in the applied linguistic tradition speaks to a central concern in management and organization theory: competence. Specifically, this book offers analyses of displays of competence based on the idea that such displays are extensively signalled and encoded in organizational discourse. Returning to Grant and Iedema's dimensions of organizational discourse studies, the research presented here is characterized by an empirical, monomodal approach to socially situated instances of text and talk that is analytically concerned with describing patterns, regularities and implicit meanings as they are manifested in the organizational practices that agents, groups and communities engage in. With regard to Grant and Iedema's fifth dimension, the research presented in this book resonates with both critical and interventionist agendas (cf. the chapters by Roberts, Scheepers and Mautner) but also with primarily descriptive analyses of organizational discourse (cf. the chapters by Meex and Verplaetse, Hendriks and van Mulken).

## 1.1 Competence

At the intersection of language and organizations, the term 'competence' is fraught with various and connected meanings, which is also apparent in the chapters of this volume. In the subsequent paragraphs we will try to create some clarity about the ways in which the term is relevant.

In the context of institutions, public governance, management and education the term 'competence' or its countable nexus 'competency' primarily refers to the capability necessary or sufficient to reach a specific goal (Weinert, 2001, p. 45). In contrast to virtue, for instance, competence is tied up with notions of learned skills and technical efficiency; it generally highlights action over internal states (Macauley and Lawton, 2006, p. 702). In human resource management it is currently taken to refer to specific, identifiable and measurable knowledge; moreover, it refers to skills, ability or attitudes which a person possesses (or should possess) and which is necessary for, or material to, the performance of an activity within a specific job context.

At one level, this kind of specific capability and willingness that actors construct and negotiate in situated work practices is the kind of competence that is referred to in the chapters of this volume. In contrast to management or HRM literature, however, the emphasis is much less on a conceptual exploration of what these competencies mean or should involve in terms of expected action in a specific job, but, as indicated above, how these expectations are signalled and shaped discursively.

At another level, the matter is further complicated by the fact that apart from other job-specific competencies, the ability to verbally interact adequately in a particular context is a competency in itself. In sociolinguistics, this is commonly referred to as communicative competence, 'the competence that enables members of a community to conduct and interpret speech' (Hymes, 1972, p. 52). In this view, language use is seen as ordered, stratified complexes of genres, styles and registers that users deploy and interpret in (types of) situations that are linked to them. For instance, doctor–patient interactions, business meetings, commercial transactions and the like trigger patterns of behaviour, including language use, that 'fit' the typical as well as the particular social context and that are interpreted as meaningful by other socialized participants in those situations.

As Roberts reminds us in the second chapter, judgements of a person as having the competencies that are deemed desirable for a specific job are frequently based on the extent to which that person's *talk* is perceived as exemplifying these attributes. The ability to produce discourse in the expected forms thus leads to a kind of 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu, 1991) which fits the forms of reasoning and inferencing required – and expected – by those who are in a position to judge the applicant under scrutiny. Those who do not have access to this linguistic capital are penalized. This is demonstrably true for the job interview, which usually has a weighty role in organizational gatekeeping processes. In cases like these, communicative competence thus assumes importance far beyond and sometimes in contradiction to what is stated in an organizational competency framework.

The relevance of communicative competence as some kind of overriding competency obviously extends to situations beyond the job interview. Especially in work and organizational situations where an important part of the tasks at hand is constituted through talk, success in the sense of achieving the goals that were set is to a large extent convergent with the measure with which actors produce discourse forms appropriate to that situation, i.e. discourse that stands a good chance of being interpreted by initiated or 'socialized' participants as fulfilling the task at hand.

Taking a discourse perspective on displays of competence thus entails attempting a fine-grained investigation of the discursive forms and processes that signal more generally job or task-related competencies in a specific organizational or institutional context. This should not only bring us closer to understanding how organizational communication is propelled by 'a provisionally stable discursive system for creating, negotiating, circulating, and applying specialized knowledge' (Smart, 2006, p. 12), but also how 'competency' notions in management and social theory are discursively manifested. There is, however, no 'one' way of doing this, and 'a discourse perspective' needs to be unpacked further in a variety of approaches, which constitutes another topic of conversation between organizational discourse studies and organizational discourse analysis: methodology.

## 1.2 Methodological perspectives

Within the frame that the chapters in this volume all present empirical, monomodal approaches to socially situated instances of text and talk that is analytically concerned with describing regularities and implicit meanings manifested in organizational practices, there is still a diversity of methodological and analytical frameworks in the chapters that attests to the conceptual breadth of discourse analysis. To situate these different approaches to discourse analysis within the equally broad field of linguistics, it is helpful to bear in mind that

> discourse analysis has crystallized within language studies in two directions. On the one hand, one can note a continuation of a linguistic use of the term in which *discourse* is viewed as the layer of *meaning* which is tied directly to situations of language use. The focus here is often on large collections of verbal material of a particular situation or activity type and the use of quantitative methods and techniques of *corpus linguistics*. [...] On the other hand, recent decades have witnessed the formulation of a broad project of discourse studies which views language use holistically, often in combination with other forms of semiotic behaviour, from the angle of what one can broadly refer to as 'social practices'. [...] Within this second tradition, discourse analysis has often (if not mostly) stood in an applied relationship to the social, with discourse research being oriented to the identification, investigation and offering solutions for the [...] real-world problems and issues in which language plays a central role. (Slembrouck, 2010, p. 121, emphasis in original)

In its more narrow articulation, discourse analysis describes and quantifies grammatical, rhetorical and structural properties of language in context. This particular brand of discourse analysis is represented in Hendriks and van Mulken's chapter which quantifies the occurrence of hedges, intensifiers, engagement markers and other linguistic features related to 'power speak' in a corpus of Dutch and English CEO letters to employees. It is also exemplified in Meex and Verplaetse's chapter, which analyses and quantifies markers of competence as modality in German and English mission statements.

However, the bulk of the chapters in this volume sample Slembrouck's second direction in the development of discourse analysis within linguistics and offer qualitative accounts of social practices such as ad hoc interpreting (Pawlack), gatekeeping (Roberts) and decision-making (Van Hout and Van Praet), political journalism (Temmerman, Riboni), marketing (Mautner) and human resource management (Scheepers). These social practices are analysed using analytical frameworks drawn from linguistic pragmatics (Verschueren and Östman, 1995), interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), linguistic ethnography (Rampton, 2007) and critical management theory (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2003; Chia, 2000). Variety in terms of analytic units is also characteristic of these chapters. The chapters by Roberts and Van Hout and Van Praet, for instance, take a micro-approach to interactional data which are then linked up with higher-level issues such as ethnicity and authority. Conversely, Scheepers and Mautner focus on macro-level discourse formations such as new management and the market society. It is here that discourse analytical 'accumulative dialogic engagement with social theoretical work on questions of language, *representation*, ideology, *power*, equity and identity' (Slembrouck, 2010, p. 120) becomes tangible.

## 1.3 Thematic development

Thematically, this volume presents discursive perspectives on a whole network of organizational themes that interconnect in several ways and together cover major areas of professional and public life such as business, public administration, education, health services, journalism, politics and religion.

The contribution by **Celia Roberts** starts from the question to what extent the competency-based job interview is a factor in the disadvantaged position of ethnic minorities and the continuation of a two-tiered labour market. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital,

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