

## Acknowledgments

I want to express my deepest gratitude to the colleagues and graduate students from our research group, the LOG (Language Organization Governance). These people are, in alphabetic order, Gerald Bartels, Joëlle Basque, Nicolas Bencherki, Chantal Benoit-Barné, Nili Berner, Boris H. J. M. Brummans, Mathieu Chaput, Maurice Charland, Geoffrey Da Costa, Hélène Giroux, Alain Létourneau, Kirstie McAllum, Thomas Martine, Frédérik Matte, Daniel Robichaud, James R. Taylor, Elizabeth E. J. Van Every, and Consuelo Vasquez. A special thank you to Stephanie Fox for greatly improving the readability of the manuscript.

All my love to Nancy, Nina, Émile, and Adrien.

# 1

## What is (Organizational) Discourse?

### How is This Book Organized?

Let me begin this book by recalling what will certainly sound like a common-sense truth to many of you: *communication matters in organizations*. We all have already heard this refrain, especially when members start complaining about something that does not appear to work in their company or institution. One department fails to communicate a vital piece of information to another, and a whole project might start falling apart, with sometimes dire consequences (the 1986 space shuttle *Challenger* disaster was partly attributed to a lack of communication between engineers and managers; see Tompkins, 1993).

Communication indeed matters, but as this book will show, it should not be reduced merely to the transfer of information, as is usually implied when people deplore so called “communication problems.” Just think about what happens (1) when organizational members are celebrating an important anniversary; (2) when the representatives of a company are signing a contract with a client; or (3) when a supervisor is asking her supervisee to complete a specific task. Are these persons informing each other? Yes, to a certain extent, if we consider, in case 1, that organizational members might be informing each other of their sense of joy and accomplishment; in case 2, that the company representatives are informing their counterparts of their engagement; and in case 3, that the supervisor is informing her supervisee about the kind of work that has to be done.

But if some pieces of information were definitely conveyed

(literally, informing means “giving a form,” which means that when we are informed about something, we are also *transformed* by what we heard, read, or more generally experienced, i.e., saw, smelled, tasted, or touched), it would be a mistake to *reduce* what is happening in these three cases to a sharing of information. To be convinced, we just need to focus on the *verbs* that are used to depict these three situations: celebrating, signing, and asking. Communicating might have something to do with informing, but it also has a lot to do with many other things that go far beyond the transfer of information: emotions in the case of celebrations, commitment in the case of a signature, power and authority in the case of what is requested.

To highlight this distinction from the “communication as information” reduction, some scholars proposed, during the 1990s, to speak in terms of (organizational) *discourse* rather than in terms of (organizational) communication (Keenoy et al., 1997; Oswick et al., 1997; Iedema and Wodak, 1999; but see also Mumby, 2004). Born from “a growing disillusionment with many of the mainstream theories and methodologies that underpin organizational studies” (Grant et al., 2004: 1), this academic movement – which was, at the outset, UK based, mainly in British business schools – posited that the detailed and systematic study of discourse could be a very innovative and productive path to better understand, analyze, or denounce how organizations function or fail to do so.

We are going to see shortly what is meant by discourse and communication, but before doing so it is important at this point to understand that the writer of these lines has a very broad view of what (organizational) communication means and refers to, which implies that oftentimes in this book, we will speak as much about organizational communication as about organizational discourse. The fact that today many scholars (including organizational communication scholars) tend to use the term “organizational discourse” to insist on the key role that all forms of *communication* play in organizational life implies for me that the term “communication” is, by definition, clearly relevant when speaking about what happens in organizations. What we need to defend, however,

is a *very broad conception* of what we mean by communication (see, for instance, Jian, Schmisser, and Fairhurst, 2008a, b).

Having mentioned this caveat, let us now examine the notions of discourse and communication.

### What is Discourse (and, By the Way, What is Communication)?

Although the academic world is full of technical characterizations, I always prefer to start from dictionary definitions when I have to specify or explain the meaning of a word. Why dictionaries? Because they contain, especially when they are sufficiently sophisticated, all the various usages of a term, as well as its history and etymology.

#### Dictionary definitions

So what are the definitions that we can find for the word “discourse” in the 1995 edition of the *Webster’s New Encyclopedic Dictionary*?

Dis-course \dis-ˈkōrs, -ˈkɔrs, dis-ˈn I : verbal interchange of ideas : CONVERSATION 2 : formal and orderly and usually extended expression of thought on a\ subject [Late Latin *discursus* “conversation”, from Latin *discurrere* “to run about”, from *dis-* + *currere* “to run”] (p. 287)

We see that two definitions are thus proposed: the more ancient one, which identifies discourse with conversation (when people speak to each other, we can refer to what is happening as a form of discourse entertained by two or more persons), and the more recent one, which identifies discourse with a sort of formal speech or address on a specific topic (as, for instance, when we describe a talk by someone as a discourse on the current situation of our economy).

The etymology mentioned in this definition is also interesting, as it shows that discourse has something to do with *going or moving about from place to place*, which is indeed typical of

both conversation and formal speech. When we discourse about a specific topic (whether conversationally or in a formal presentation), we tend to cover its different aspects, which leads us from one idea or question to another. If a discourse can be identified (it has its own unity and coherence, as well as a beginning, a middle, and an end), it is therefore also marked by a certain plurality and heterogeneity.

### Discourse vs. discourse

If we now turn to what scholars have been saying about discourse for the past 60 years (the linguist Zellig S. Harris, from the University of Pennsylvania, is usually credited for having coined the term "Discourse Analysis" as early as 1952), we see some interesting overlaps with these dictionary definitions. The sociolinguist Michael Stubbs (1983), for instance, wrote that discourse refers to "naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse," which, as he says, amounts to saying that discourse is "language above the sentence or above the clause" (p. 1).

Before the 1950s, linguists indeed did tend to focus exclusively on language at or under the sentence level. Although this tendency remains very strong (for instance, Noam Chomsky (1957, 1997), the famous linguist and activist, spent his entire career figuring out the right way to analyze sentences like "John is intelligent" or "John put the book on the shelf"), more and more scholars (not only linguists, but also sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and communication scholars) began to realize that discourse also had its own logic and organization and that it was consequently worth studying.

Interestingly, they realized that there were at least two ways to conceive of discourse – two ways that, in many respects, echo the dictionary definitions that we have just discussed. James Paul Gee (1990, 1999), for example, proposed to establish an important distinction between "Discourses," with a capital "D," and "discourse" with a small "d" (see also Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). To explain what he means by Discourses (with a big "D"), he writes:

The key to Discourses is "recognition." If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools and places together in such a way that others recognize you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular of what (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer). Whatever you have done must be similar enough to other performances to be recognizable. However, if it is different enough from what has gone before, but still recognizable, it can simultaneously change and transform Discourses. If it is not recognizable, then you're not "in" the Discourse. (Gee, 1999: 18)

As Gee notices, when you identify a Discourse with a big "D," it means that you are able to recognize its *typical* form or content (what he calls the *what*), as well as its *typical* context of production (*who* said it and in *what circumstances*).

Think, for instance, of the typical Discourse of a doctor, manager, professor, environmental activist, or right-wing politician and you will have an idea of what a Discourse might look like. It does not have to be in the context of a formal speech (you can easily recognize how doctors typically speak during a simple consultation, or how someone speaks "like a teacher," sometimes even outside the classroom), but what is crucial is that you are able to *recognize* or *identify* something you think you already heard, read, or know.

As we will see later, this type of Discourse analysis is usually associated with the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1977a, b, 1978), who became world renowned for his contribution to the study of the *typical* discursive forms associated with specific historical periods of time and disciplines (medicine, education, justice, etc.). At this point, it is also noteworthy that people who are reproducing specific Discourses can literally be seen as their *carriers*, which means that we could almost say that not only are these persons expressing themselves when they are talking, but also the (typical) Discourses they represent. In this connection, Gee (1999) has no hesitation in writing that:

It is sometimes helpful to think about social and political issues as if it is not just us humans who are talking and interacting with each other,

but rather, the Discourses we represent and enact, and for which we are "carriers." The Discourses we enact existed before each of us came on the scene and most of them will exist long after we have left the scene. Discourses, through our words and deeds, carry on conversations with each other through history, and, in doing so, form human history. (p. 18)

This is what happens when we witness two types of Discourses confronting and/or responding to each other. Think, for instance, of the typical Discourse of union representatives responding to the typical Discourse of top managers and you will have an idea of what Gee means here.

So what is a *small "d" discourse* in comparison? It is "language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversation and stories)" (Gee, 1999: 17). In other words, we more or less find here the other dictionary definition, which identifies discourse with "a verbal interchange of ideas," a practice associated with conversation (although we will see that discourse (even with a small "d") cannot be reduced to the mere "interchange of ideas," which sounds like the "interchange of information," which we criticized earlier).

Beyond the identification of typical formats, contents, styles, and contexts (associated, as we saw, with Discourses), studying discourse (with a small "d") thus requires that we analyze the *interactional event* in itself, with its complexity, but also its peculiarities. By this, I mean that however typical, emblematic, representative, or characteristic what someone said or wrote might be, it will always be an *event* in itself, to the extent that the activity of saying or writing what she said or wrote will just have happened *once* in the whole history of the universe.

Although this might sound a little (too) philosophical, it is important to understand this point, to the extent that this whole book will be (directly or indirectly) addressing it throughout the remaining chapters. Discourse analysts can indeed be divided into two broad categories:

1. Scholars who tend to be mainly interested in Discourses with a big "D" and who focus on the repetition, reproduction, or

iteration of specific topics of discussion, styles of communication, and rights to speak. These scholars are, as mentioned earlier, usually associated with Foucault's work, although not exclusively, and tend to be interested, as we will see, in questions of power, ideologies, and domination.

2. Scholars who tend to focus on the eventful character of conversation and interaction, i.e., what we also call discourse (with a small "d") and who are more interested in what people are up to when they communicate with each other (what they do and how they do what they do), as well as how the conversation itself functions and is organized. These latter will usually be associated with the work of Harvey Sacks (1992), an American sociologist who, in the 1960s, founded a field of study called "conversation analysis."

Conversation analysts, as we will see, are typically interested in the detail of what they call "naturally occurring interactions" and focus their attention on what is *done* or *accomplished* by the people who communicate with each other. Although they too are also interested in repetition and reproduction (after all, any scientific endeavor aims at the recognition of patterns), they will usually not go as far as speaking of "carriers" of specific discourses when referring to people in conversation. For them, people engaged in conversations are, first and foremost, developing sensible and meaningful forms of conduct that are produced and recognized as such (Pomerantz and Fehr, 1997, 2011).

We will go back to these two forms of discourse analysis later in this chapter, but at this point, it is worth noting that this distinction between Discourse and discourse has not inhibited other scholars from acknowledging both aspects at the same time in their analyses (see, for instance, Fairclough, 1992; Wetherell, 1998; Taylor and Van Every, 2000, or, more recently, Cooren et al., 2007).<sup>1</sup> In other words, analyzing what someone is saying or writing as a Discourse, that is, as representative of a *typical* way of thinking or speaking about a given topic or question, does not mean that one cannot *also* analyze what she is saying or writing in

terms of what she is accomplishing or *up to* in the context of the interaction she is engaged in.

### Discourse and communication

Another question that can be raised about discourse in general (whether “big D” or “small d”) is related to *what counts* or *does not count* as discourse. Although, so far, we have seen that discourse could be conceived of in terms of its repetitive or eventful character, one could also wonder whether discourse should be reduced to (the product of) verbal exchanges or written documents. Some scholars, for example, consider that the term “discourse” should not only encompass what is said in a given conversation, but also include gestures, intonations, facial expressions, or the proxemic<sup>2</sup> features of an interaction. In other words, they consider all these dimensions to be potentially meaningful in any interaction and that as such they should be included in what we mean by discourse (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999).

Why does it seem so important to extend discourse to its so-called “non-verbal aspects”? Precisely because they are meaningful and they actively participate in (or contribute to) what is performed or accomplished, especially when people happen to speak to each other.<sup>3</sup> Just imagine a boss who would say to her employee, “George, I’d like to speak with you, please,” with a big smile and a cheerful tone or, on the contrary, with an embarrassed face and tone, and you will have a pretty clear idea of what this smile and cheerful tone or her embarrassed face and tone are *communicating* to George (and to us), as well as their significance in both situations.

In the case of the big smile and the cheerful tone, chances are that George will be anticipating some good news from his boss (“Will I have some kind of promotion or salary increase?”), while in the other case, he can already anticipate that his world might be falling apart (“Is she about to announce that I am fired?” or “Is our project terminated?”). As conversation analysts like to remind us, *everything* is potentially meaningful at each moment of an interaction, an idea that they express by using the expression “No

time out” (Garfinkel, 2002). “No time out” means that participants engaged in a conversation cannot escape the communication game they are involved in, which means that everything they say, express, or do (consciously or unconsciously) is available for interpretation by their interlocutors (and the analysts).

To this picture we could add, of course, all the things that potentially communicate something in a given situation. Not only is it body language (facial expressions, gestures, postures, etc.), but also *anything* that might make a difference in the way a situation is interpreted: pieces of furniture, decorations, clothes, architectural elements, and so on. This is where the notion of discourse might, to some, no longer look relevant, but where the term “communication” still appears to work. What I mean is that some could question that we identify pieces of furniture, decorations (a painting, for example), clothes, or architectural elements with discourse to the extent that we seem suddenly remote from what people are doing or up to in a conversation.

However, we could also point out that all these things are *telling* us or *communicating* something. To understand this point, think, for instance, about the amount of money that some corporations and institutions regularly invest in the design of their buildings and furniture. Even if these investments might officially have been made in the name of efficiency and comfort, they will also *communicate something* to the visitors and to the employees themselves: majesty, prestige, wealth, modernity, coolness, sobriety, austerity, and so on. All these impressions will be associated with the institution or corporation and will communicate something about them (Kuhn and Burk, 2014).

As proposed by Cooren, Bencherki, Chaput, and Vásquez (forthcoming), communication should thus be generally defined as the establishment of a link, connection, or relationship through something (see also Cooren, 2000). This thing can be as diverse as a piece of information, a feeling of joy or anger, an order or promise, an apology or congratulations. Furthermore, who or what communicates can certainly be individuals, but also architectural elements, artifacts, documents, and even principles, ideas or values (Cooren, 2010). Finally, this link can be established through

something that is said, but also something that is written, or even, more generally, expressed (through gestures, facial expressions, or intonations, for instance).

But whether we think that what we try to analyze is more a matter of communication than discourse does not really make a difference, since everything depends on what we end up meaning by our use of these terms (for some discussion, see Jian, Schmisser, and Fairhurst, 2008a, b; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2008; Putnam, 2008; Taylor, 2008). What does matter is that we start to understand why discourse and communication might indeed represent key aspects of our organizational life.

### *What is Organizational Discourse?*

Having started to explore what the term “discourse” means *per se*, we can now turn to a second question, which gets closer to the theme of this book: what is *organizational* discourse?

#### Common sense vs. constitutive definitions

At first sight, an obvious way to define what organizational discourse is would be to say that it is the discourse that is taking place within an organization and/or that deals with organizational issues, whatever they may be (strategies, culture, control, ideologies, coercion, etc.). Studying organizational discourse would thus consist of studying how people are talking, writing, or more generally interacting regarding organizational matters, whether these matters concern, for instance, strategic issues (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) or routine operations (Feldman, 2000; Feldman and Pentland, 2005).

In their *Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, Grant et al. (2004) venture a definition when they write that:

The term “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 artifacts) that bring

organizationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated and consumed. (p. 3)

Interestingly, we find here the two dimensions of discourse that were highlighted in our previous section on discourse: (1) Discourse (with a big “D”) as a “structured collection of texts,” which marks the fact that organizational members are reproducing certain Discourses when communicating with each other; and (2) discourse (with a small “d”) when they note that these structured collection of texts are “embodied in the practices of talking and writing,” which refers to the eventful character of language-in-use.

Note also that they extend the term “organizational discourse” to “a wide variety of visual representations and cultural artifacts” (p. 3), thus echoing our point about discourse as corresponding to anything that is telling us or communicating something, whether it is a document, a turn of talk, a graph, or a piece of furniture.

But what is key in this definition is that these discourses (with a big “D” or small “d”) “bring organizationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated and consumed” (p. 3; my italics). For a discourse to be considered *organizational*, according to Grant et al. (2004), we therefore need to go beyond the fact that it is simply taking place within an organization or addressing organizational matters. This discourse also should be considered as *constituting* what they call “organizationally related objects.” To understand what they mean here, just think of anything that characterizes the organizational world: official statements, directives, memos, newsletters, annual reports, organizational charts, and so on.

All these “objects” are not only produced, disseminated, and consumed, but also constituted or brought into being by discourse (whether big “D” or small “d”). To this list, we could also add other things that are not, properly speaking, disseminated or consumed, but that also define, in many respects, the organizational world. I am thinking of meetings (Boden, 1994; Cooren, 2007), press conferences (Bhatia, 2006), coordinated activities (Cooren and Fairhurst, 2004), organizational culture (Eisenberg and Riley, 2001) or leadership (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien,

2012). Without discourse, these things would not exist, which means that studying (organizational) discourse becomes a way to understand how things as various as leadership, meetings, or press conferences not only work (or fail to), but also *exist*.

### Discourse and organizational constitution

As we now begin to understand, studying organizational discourse does not only consist of analyzing the documents and conversations as well as visual representations and cultural artifacts that compose the events and routines of organizational life, but also amounts, in its strongest version, to claiming that discourse (or communication in general) constitutes the very means by which organizational forms exist or, to put it in academic terms, are *brought into being* (Grant et al., 2004; Hardy et al., 2004). This position is called a *constitutive* approach, and was coined the CCO perspective (for *communicative constitution of organization*) by McPhee and Zaug (2000) as well as Putnam and Nicotera (2009). According to this viewpoint, studying discourse allows us to unveil the mechanisms by which “human beings coordinate actions, create relationships, and maintain organizations” (Putnam, Nicotera, and McPhee, 2009: 1).

Claiming that organizations are discursively or communicatively constituted thus not only means that interactions take place or that documents are circulated *in* organizations, but that, in many respects, *there would not be any organization at all without them* (Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren, 2009; Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, and Lair, 2004; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004; Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy, 2004; Taylor, 1988, 1993; Taylor and Van Every, 2000, 2011, 2014). Just imagine what an organization would be without the contracts that are signed in its name, the recurring conversations about its present situation or future, the directives that define what members should or should not be doing, or the mission statements that defines its *raison d'être*? I do not think it is extremely controversial to answer that indeed *there would not be any organization at all*, since it is hard to imagine what an organization would do or be without them.

If correct, such a *constitutive* approach to discourse, which has been implicitly defended by some organizational communication scholars for more than 25 years (Taylor, 1988, 1993; Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, and Robichaud, 1996), shows that the role of discourse in organizational settings is far from being anecdotal and that studying organizational discourse gives us access to some of the most basic aspects of organizational life. In this book, I will thus take it for granted that anybody who is interested in organizational discourse will, in one way or another, defend a constitutive approach.

This does not mean, of course, that everybody interested in organizational discourse agrees about the level of constitution (we will go back to this question later, but see, for example, Fairclough, 2005, or Reed, 2010). However, I believe that anybody who takes the question of organizational discourse seriously will admit that this object has some constitutive power, which in turn means that studying it allows us to understand the mode of being and functioning (or dysfunctioning) of organizational forms, whether it is to simply analyze them or to denounce them.

### Objectives and Organization of This Book

In order to demonstrate the importance of studying discourse and communication, this book will show how classical organizational themes, objects, and questions can be illuminated from a discursive perspective. Having presented in this chapter, in general terms, what can be meant by (organizational) discourse, I will introduce you, in chapter 2, to *six* ways of analyzing it. The decision to retain only six approaches (semiotics, rhetoric, speech act theory, conversation analysis/ethnomethodology, narrative analysis, and critical discourse analysis) has, of course, its share of arbitrariness. I believe, however, that it is a selection that provides an introduction, rather exhaustively, to the various methodologies and perspectives that have been mobilized during the past 25 years by the growing literature on organizational discourse.

Having done that, I will then show how we can study

coordination and organizing (chapter 3), organizational culture and identity (chapter 4), and negotiation, decision-making, and conflicts in the context of meetings (chapter 5). The choice of focusing on these traditional organizational “objects” or “themes” is, of course, deliberate, as I believe you will be more interested in learning about what these discursive perspectives have to teach you about culture, negotiation, or conflicts than you will be inclined to focus on the various perspectives or approaches that discourse analysis has to offer (there are plenty of readers or edited volumes that already do that: see, for example, van Dijk, 1997a, b; Jaworski and Coupland, 1999).

It is, of course, crucial that you be introduced to the various ways and methods of analyzing (organizational) discourse and how to mobilize them (and chapter 2 is precisely meant to introduce you to this diversity), but I believe it will be more interesting and productive to operationalize these methods, theories, and approaches throughout the book, allowing you to see what these various discursive perspectives can teach us about organizational life in general.

This book will thus be privileging the Indian “blind men and an elephant” approach. What do I mean? According to this ancient tale, a group of blind men is gathered around an elephant, with each of them permitted to touch only one body part of the animal. Having done so, they are then asked to compare their respective experiences, which leads them to realize that they cannot reach an agreement about what it is they have come into contact with. In the Buddhist version of this tale, the man who touched the elephant’s head says that it feels like a pot, the one who touched the ear says that it is actually a winnowing basket, while others declare that “it is a plowshare (tusk), a plow (trunk), a granary (body), a pillar (foot), a mortar (back), a pestle (tail) or a brush (tip of the tail)” (Wikipedia, 2014).

You have only to replace “elephant” with “organizational discourse,” and you will see, throughout this book, that different scholars tend to privilege different aspects of this specific activity, which leads them to reach different conclusions about what organizational discourse might be, as well as its constitutive role

in organizational life.<sup>4</sup> Each chapter (from chapters 3 to 5) will thus correspond to a specific organizational topic or practice (the elephant, in the Indian tale) that will be addressed and analyzed from the six perspectives (the blind men) that are presented in chapter 2. My objective will be to *articulate* these various perspectives without losing sight of their respective specificities.

Throughout the book, the unifying thread will be the communicative constitutive approach (CCO), as implicitly or explicitly advocated by the great majority of organizational discourse analysts and theorists. This unifying thread will also allow me to maintain a global coherence that will help you distinguish between discursive perspectives and other approaches to organizational life.