

Business Discourse as a Site of Inherent Struggle

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What exactly is the nature of the business discourse? In this paper I assemble sources suggesting that business discourse is inherently conflictual. I link the business ideology of competition (Porter, 1979, 1980, 1985) to the Habermasian concept of strategic action (Habermas, 1984) and argue that Business Discourse is both consciously and unconsciously strategic, leading in the latter case to what Habermas calls systematically distorted communication. I support this claim with evidence from a number of sources, sketching a picture of business as a set of discursive practices that not only account for, effect and mirror movements of money and material goods but which also, in more spontaneous manifestations, reveal the internal dilemmas of a strategist bound by the conventions and obligations of social interaction (Goffman, 1967). Examples show that the discursive practices of the business world are often unconsciously hybrid and conflictual or “distorted” (as Habermas has it). Conflictual or distorted communication typically appears at four distinct sites: i) communication between business organisations; ii) communication between employers and managers and their employees; iii) communication between sellers and buyers; and iv) communication between owners/agents and financiers or shareholders. Three distinct manifestations of spontaneous conflict or distortion are discussed in this paper: a) the occlusion of risky topics, b) a high incidence of discursive alternations, and c) the occurrence of impeded or self-contradictory speech.

Introduction

I will argue in this paper that the forms of talk and the written texts produced by business organisations in the course of their operations (in all of the complex sites and activities involved in *doing* or *carrying on business*) implicate an orientation to communication and language that is largely distinct from the orientation to communication and language found in other orders of life, and most especially that found in the communicative practices of the lifeworld. The idea that business in a free market economy is fundamentally orientated towards competition and competitive advantage has been widely accepted as given for the past several decades (Porter, 1979, 1980, 1985). Thus, success is the underlying criterion in all business activity. Success in a competitive environment implies strategic thinking and acting, and is measured against the financial bottom line, the only essential one for business (see Friedman, 1962). The achievement of business success is mediated by the operationalisation of certain other key values—efficiency, access to privileged information, innovation, increasing productivity, continuous improvement, and growth.

Doing business consists, in a very important sense, of discursive practices (see Boden, 1994; Sarangi & Weick, 1995; Mumby and Clair 1997; Roberts, 1999; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Chia, 2000; Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Tsoukas, 2005). Through these discursive practices, coherent discourses (or rationalities) are espoused and/or enacted. These discourses in turn legitimise positions and strategies, and since they mirror and enact the disparate interests of different parties (i.e. different business entities), they are always in potential or actual conflict. Hence, discursive conflict is characteristic of all business communication, though it manifests itself in different ways at different levels of an organisation and in different communicative contexts. The conflictual nature of business discourse, in fact, is presupposed in the business literature on strategic ambiguity (growing out of Eisenberg, 1984); and the whole contemporary emphasis (in business and management discourse) on *strategy* implies a context of competing and potentially conflicting interests. The concept of strategy in business and management thinking came to the fore rather decisively in 1980 when Porter published a widely read book (*Competitive Strategy*, 1980) and the Strategic Management Society founded the *Strategic Management Journal*. However, it is important to grasp that business and management thinking have always been strategic, insofar as they are inherently competitive.

The potential problems that might be posed by competing or conflicting interests, interest-orientated discourses, and conflictual or distorted communication have traditionally been avoided by conscious *strategies* that, by their very existence, attest to the existence of the problems. Some classic strategies that have evolved in business organisations are a) compartmentalisation and separation of functions or interest groups, b) strategic uses of ambiguity and vagueness, and c) strategic interdiscursivity (Candlin, 1999, 2006; Iedema, 2003; Iedema, Degeling, Braithwaite & White, 2004). As Leitch and Davenport (2007) point out, the *strategic* use of ambiguity allows multiple perspectives and objectives to co-exist, while also enabling discourse actors who subscribe to more or less incommensurable ideologies to work together or in parallel.

The inherently conflicting interests of employees and owners/managers have certainly been exacerbated by the advent of the new capitalism and the new managerialism that accompanies it, with its emphasis on standardisation, responsabilisation, accountability and transparency (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996; Lankshear, 1998; Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002). However, Jürgen Habermas, the German social theorist and political philosopher, has proposed more deeply-seated causes for the inherently conflictual nature of certain types of discourse in his elaborate theory of social action (1984, 1987); of these, business discourse represents a prime example. Habermas is almost alone in acknowledging the fundamental necessity of deception in strategic action, and argues that we need to distinguish conscious deception from unconscious deception. Conscious deception relies on *deliberately strategic* uses of communication, while unconscious deception results in *strategically distorted* communication.

Unconscious deception accompanied by conflict, or distortion, typically appears in four distinct sites of spontaneous business communication: i) communication between business organisations; ii) communication between employers and managers and their employees; iii) communication between sellers and buyers (with every organisation assuming each role on different occasions); and iv) communication between owners (and agents) and their financiers and shareholders. Three distinct manifestations of spontaneous conflict or distortion are discussed in this paper: a) the occlusion of risky topics, b) a high incidence of unconscious discursive alternations, and c) the occurrence of impeded or self-contradictory speech (and sometimes writing).

A social theoretical framework

As noted above, the social theory of Jürgen Habermas makes important hypotheses about language use in different spheres of social life (his "universal pragmatics"). His claims remain largely untested by linguists. Habermas developed his theory through a long engagement with the ideas of Max Weber. Weber understood a cultural tradition to be made up of separate "spheres of value" each with its own "intrinsic logic" [*innere Eingesetzlichkeit*] and, hence each (in Weber's view) in fundamentally irreconcilable conflict with all others. Habermas built on Weber's conception of value spheres, each with its own inner logic or rationality. However, Habermas distinguished between cultural "value spheres" and social "orders of life" (which he also refers to as "institutionalized action systems"). The latter are governed by worldly interests, the former by ideas. Habermas (1984: 234-235) postulates five life orders—i.e. systems of social or cultural action. There are two primarily *cultural* action systems based on the quest for (possession of) "ideal goods": Knowledge (scientific enterprise), and Art (artistic enterprise). And there are three primarily social "action systems" based on the quest for (possession) of "worldly goods": Wealth (the economy); Power (politics); and Love (sex and marriage).

In later work (1998), Habermas writes of the three "steering mechanisms" that hold society together:

- Money
- Power
- Solidarity

The first two of these mechanisms constitute "systems"—there is the political system and the economic system. These systems are realised by strategic action, and characteristic goals consist of the successful implementation of plans, or strategies. The third mechanism operates within the lifeworld, the everyday taken-for-granted cultural and social environment in which we all normally interact (1987: 119-52). The lifeworld is, in a sense, the product of communicative action, realised through reciprocal speech acts aimed at mutual understanding and agreement.

Types of social action

Social action is generally understood by sociologists to mean action that takes account of the actions and reactions of other people, i.e. other social actors. According to Habermas, all human action—social or otherwise—is, teleological, i.e. goal-directed (1984: 101). *Social* action (ibid.) involves "the interlacing of egocentric calculations of utility," "a socially integrating agreement about values and norms," and a consensual face-maintaining relation between performers and their audiences (see Goffman, 1959, 1967). It *may* involve the cooperative process of interpretation – or meaning-making—that Habermas refers to a "communicative action" [*kommunikatives Handeln*], and which he treats as a sub-species of social action; but it will almost inevitably involve some more partial use of language to mediate action and achieve specific results. For Habermas, social action is communicative in as much as it is social, but different types of social action are communicative to different degrees. Habermas does *not* equate communicative action with language use (ibid.): language is *a medium of communication* but it functions differently in different spheres of life. It plays one role in the kind of

goal-directed actions that relate primarily to "the objective world," another one in the norm-building actions that relate to "the social world," and a different role again in the self-styling face-oriented actions that dominate "the subjective world" (1984: 101). Only in the unsystematised environment of the lifeworld does genuine communication take place, exercising language in all of its possible modes.

It seems clear that social action is inherently communicative, in that it presupposes a shared lifeworld in which most actions imply social interactions, and only make sense in terms of a system of shared meanings.¹ Communication in this sense entails activation of a body of shared knowledge, along with modes of interpretation and understanding that are embedded in a distinct cultural tradition. Communicative *action*, however, is aimed at reaching understanding and agreement. It can be resolved analytically into several distinct components, some ones of which are privileged by certain "orders of life". The main subtypes of social action are given below.

Subtypes of social action	Their functions	Their goals
Expressive action	representing one's self	understanding
Constative action	representing states of affairs	agreement
Normatively regulated action	establishing relationships	community
Strategic action of others	influencing the behaviour	success

For Habermas, the most important distinction is that between actions oriented to understanding and actions oriented to success. For him, The main split is between communicative action (with its expressive, constative and regulative components) and strategic action. In effect, we have two major modes of social action:

1. **communicative action** aimed at reaching mutual understanding and agreement through openness and honesty—the discourse of the lifeworld; and
2. **strategic action** aimed at individual success; this usually involves attempts to influence the actions of others; strategic action thus encompasses the possibility of deception, which may be conscious or unconscious

Subtypes of strategic action are set out diagrammatically in Figure 1 below (after Habermas, 1984: 333):

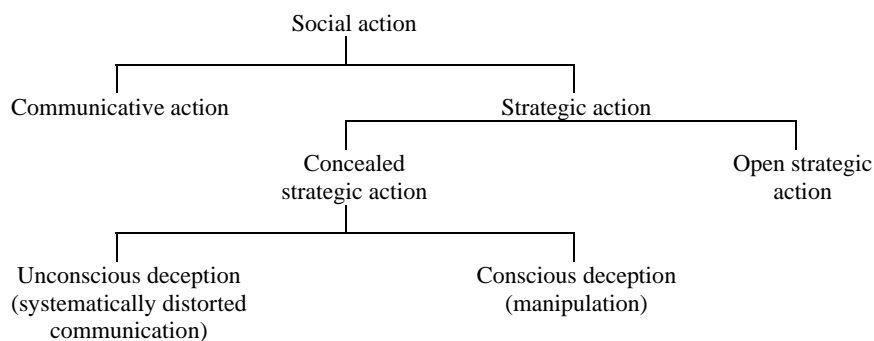


Figure 1: Subtypes of social action: subtypes of strategic action.

Conscious deception is part and parcel of the competitive world of commerce or business, where information is one of the competitive advantages a firm can hope to gain. This is one of the meanings of *strategy*. Systematically distorted communication, on the other hand, is a pathological mode of communication in which there exists in the minds of certain participants "a confusion between actions oriented towards reaching understanding and actions oriented to success" (1984: 332). In both conscious deception and unconscious deception (what Habermas refers to as "systematically distorted communication") "at least one of the parties behaves with an orientation to success, but leaves others to believe that all the presuppositions of communicative action are satisfied." But, in unconscious deception, "at least one of the parties is deceiving himself [sic] about the fact that he [sic] is acting with an attitude oriented to success *and is only keeping up the appearance of communicative action*" (1984: 332; my emphasis). It is the tension created by this last situation, both

¹ For discussions of the ways in which discourse and action intersect see Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Tietze, Cohen & Musson, 2003; and Fairclough, 2005b. For different ways in which discourse can be conceptualised, and applied to our understanding of business organisations, see Iedema, 2006, Alvesson & Karreman, 2000 and Alvesson & Deetz, 2000.

subjectively, for the individual, and intersubjectively, in dialogic interaction, that I wish to explore in this paper, in relation to discourses of business organisations.

Business as a set of discursive practices

Communicative action, conceived as a discourse, is the characteristic relational discourse of the lifeworld: the everyday taken-for-granted cultural and social environment in which we normally interact (Habermas, 1987: 119-52). Meanwhile the constraints of *strategic* action generate a discourse of competitive, goal-directed action. While the *values* of the lifeworld range over Maslow's hierarchy of individual needs, they also encompass communitarian values of the kind that help small-scale communities and societies to cohere: active affiliation with group members, adherence to spoken and unspoken norms of behaviour, loyalty, honesty and sincerity. These values are encoded in the discourse of the lifeworld. Meanwhile, the values of strategic action correspond in most ways to the goals of a business or economic enterprise, so well described by Freidman (1962) and Porter (1985): a competitive advantage in the marketplace, translating into financial gains. And the discourse of business reflects these values.

A business owner (or owners) must influence three separate, potentially resistant groups of stakeholders if the business is to survive and prosper. These are:

- Employees
- Suppliers
- Wholesale customers
- Retail customers
- Shareholders and financiers

Distortion has three important sources: i) the competing roles and/or interests of the actors, within or between organisations; ii) the inherent psychological and moral ambivalence of the employment contract; and iii) the intersection of one discourse domain by discourses from another. The main types of conflictual communication that are characteristic of business discourse reflect the three types of relationship identified above. They are in a double sense asymmetrical, since each party in each main type attempts to protect and promote disparate interests:

BusOrg	–	Other
Employer	–	Employees
Supplier	–	Customers
Customer	–	Suppliers
Owners	–	Shareholders

In this paper, my subject matters consists of, essentially, *all the business-oriented discourses of business organisations*. Although "Business Communication" and "Organisational Communication" and "Management Communication" have long been recognised as separate fields of research and practice (Smelzer, Glab & Golen, 1983), it is argued here that we can treat all these types of communication as manifestations of Business Discourse. Some writers make an implicit assumption to this effect.

Grant and Hardy (2004: 5) have argued that an organisation can be defined in terms of its communicative, or symbolic, practices – practices that together constitute a culture and (as they say) a "discourse":

The term 'discourse' has been defined as sets of statements that bring social objects into being (Parker 1992). In using the term '*organizational* discourse', we refer to the structured collections 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 (Phillips and Hardy 2002; Grant et al. 1998).

The term Business Discourse has a broader scope than Organisational Discourse, reflecting a broader sphere of social action (just as organisational discourse per se contains elements foreign to strategic action). As a goal-oriented discourse, Business Discourse is focused on carrying on economically beneficial transactions, making deals that favour one party over others, and ultimately—in one way or another—accumulating capital. The latter aim is traditionally referred to as the "bottom line". However, to accomplish this, Business Discourse must constitute and sustain organisational structures and relations that mediate its activities.

Dynamic tensions in organisational discourse

It is not a secret that communication within organisations is a delicate, nuanced and frequently fraught affair on which much may hang. The complex structures and functions of business organisations, and the complex networks of asymmetrical personal relationships that are involved in their day-to-day operation, invariably produce communicative tensions. Level of politeness must constantly be calibrated anew, even for such an apparently uncomplicated textual product as an email. As Rogers and Lee-Wong (2003) put it, balancing competing communicative purposes and obligations "requires a substantial knowledge of rhetorical and linguistic alternatives" (p. 379), since "conventional politeness dimensions, such as deference, solidarity, and non-imposition are challenged by organizational obligations and workplace tasks requiring confidence, direction, and individuality. Rogers and Lee-Wong (2003) have reconceptualised politeness in organisational contexts, specifically in relation to subordinate-to-superior reporting, as a threefold set of dynamic tensions. These are represented in Table 1 below (based on Rogers and Lee-Wong, 2003, Figure 1, page 396).

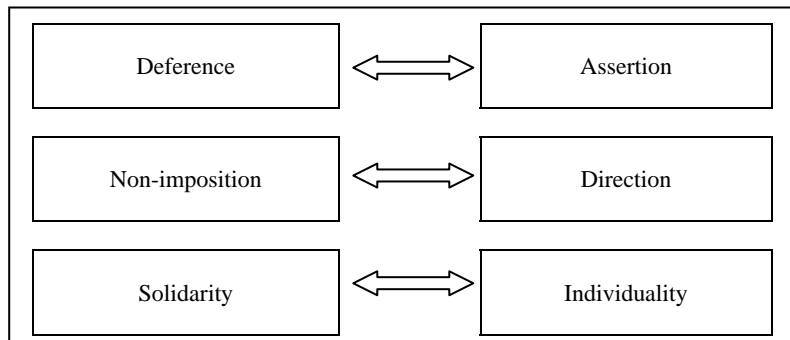


Figure 1. Dynamic Tensions in Subordinate-to-Superior reporting

Although Rogers and Lee-Wong focus on subordinates reporting, the kinds of dynamic tension described, and the recurrent need to balance competing imperatives, are found widely throughout business organisations, as well as non-business organisations and institutions, all of which are organised on some kind of hierarchical model no matter how "flat" this may be or seem to be. The kind of recognition and mapping pioneered by Rogers and Lee-Wong are of the greatest significance and have great positive potential for improved communication in business and organisations, if and when these adopt a systematic and research-based approach to communication training. However, the sources of these tensions are systemic, and go to the actual nature of business and of organisations as evolving adaptive systems grounded in competition and control.

Symptoms of unconscious conflict and internal struggle

Based on a survey of the literature, there appear to be three distinct ways in which business discourse—in the broadest sense—can be "distorted." Firstly, two or more distinct discourses, or rationalities, may be co-present in the discursive repertoire of an organisation, and hence in the repertoires of the individuals who are its members. Not only do individuals come into conflict as they espouse and attempt to enact a particular discourse, but frequently the same person will vacillate between discourses. This is illustrated below with data from Iedema et al. (2004). Secondly, certain kinds of discourse can be totally suppressed, or occluded. This is another ultimately counterproductive process that Chris Argyris has spent much of his life documenting and attempting to reverse. Discursive actors become so used to repressing views they consider unpopular or simply face-threatening that they become incapable of articulating any opinions except the ones that are dominant in an organisation. They develop "defensive mechanisms" that are almost impossible to breach (Argyris, 1993, 2002; Argyris & Schön, 1996). Finally, under certain kinds of pressure, some individuals produce "distorted" utterances where competing or conflicting discourse appear side by side and their contradictions interfere with communication itself. Iedema notes in this connection that his data show "that the doctor-manager positions himself *across* these discourses and manages their inherent incommensurabilities before a heterogeneous audience and on occasions even *within the one utterance*" (2003: 15). This will be illustrated with data from a small scale research project (carried out by Healey, 2006, as masters qualifying research).

The three forms of distortion recognised above can be summarised as

1. Occluded discourse
2. Competing discourses
3. Impeded or self-contradictory discourse

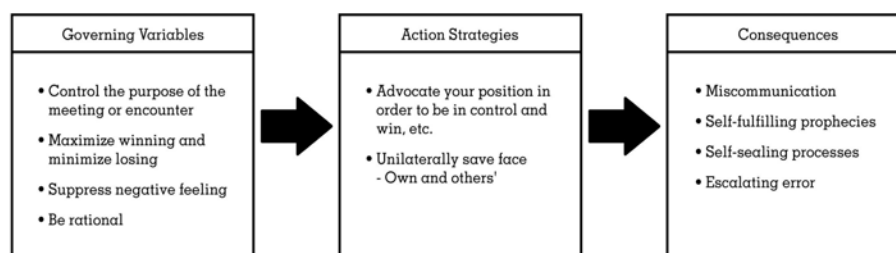
1 Occluded discourse

The term "occluded discourse" is meant to describe the kind of situation that prevails in business organisations, in which genuine communication—including the open and honest expression of personal thoughts and judgements—is routinely suppressed. This happens when one's thoughts and judgements are perceived to challenge or conflict with the dominant discourse of the organisation, or to be embarrassing or in some way threatening to other members of the organisation. Chris Argyris (a Harvard management scholar) has over the past thirty years documented processes of occlusion in business organisations. He has also recorded the often highly sophisticated tropes of "defensive reasoning" that have to be overcome before such occluded discourses can be acknowledged and articulated (Argyris, 1993, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, Argyris and Schön, 1996). Argyris writes of the "underground organisation" with its hidden discourses in ways that are reminiscent of the "hidden transcripts" of subordinate groups described by Scott (1990). Occlusion means that criticism can be shaken off (as 'not our fault'), while opposing or innovative points of view may be discouraged. The occluded discourses are "undiscussable." He often focuses on the face-threatening nature of the occluded discourse, seeming to think that personal-relational issues are what mainly inhibit free expression. Discourses are spontaneously occluded when individuals are "trying to solve problems that are potentially or actually embarrassing, or threatening to their sense of competence in solving such problems" (Argyris, 2002: 211). As he puts it elsewhere (2004a):

Organizational defensive routines are any kind of action designed to protect the players, and do so in such a way that it prevents learning for what might be embarrassing or threatening. These defensive routines really support a defensive mindset, and they support it in an underground manner, not in an above-ground manner.

However, at times he suggests that the organisations themselves have evolved these defensive traits. It is as if the organization has geared up to protect itself through a system of methodical "cover-ups" – and cover-ups of the cover-ups (Argyris, 2004a). Argyris speaks of a "defensive-reasoning mindset." He explains that little is done to counteract the effects of the underground organisation "mainly because ... those who share the defensive reasoning mindset believe they must continue doing so to prevent the organization from going out of control, from imploding."² He also describes how abstract language is relied on to preserve the individual's or the group's inefficient beliefs about how they should behave, and how they should cope with critical incidents (such as occur in business all the time). All this "leads to an organization that has an above-ground management world, and a below-ground management world" (Argyris, 2004).

According to Argyris, the most widespread discourse used in business organisations and transactions—what he calls a "theory-in-use"—is a dysfunctional one, precisely *in business contexts*. I reproduce his schematic representation of this discourse system below (from Argyris, 2002; it is referred to as Model I). The reader might note that in many respects it incorporates the kind of "involvements obligations" described by Goffman (1967) as essential to the interaction order.



Model I: Theory-in-Use

In business contexts the communicative practices that arise from a reluctance to discuss problems that are "potentially or actually embarrassing, or threatening to their sense of competence" lead to miscommunication on more vital issues that go to the successful (i.e. efficient and effective) operation of a business organisation. *Face-saving strategies* are dysfunctional in the context of business strategies, where rational thought is meant to prevail over sentiment and irrational bias. Argyris, and facilitators using his approach, specialize in helping

² Argyris notes that, by contrast, there is, simultaneously, within organizations, a "productive reasoning mindset" that produces "validatable knowledge, informed choices, and transparent reasoning, so claims can be tested." The two mindsets interact in complex ways in the life of an organisation.

managers to enunciate their privately held views in a public forum, before colleagues, and to justify these views and deal with relationship issues that arise as a consequence of airing them. The goal of such interventions is a new kind of discourse system, or "model of Theory-in-Use" (Model II). Argyris (2002) compares the tacit imperatives of these two systems in the Table X below:

Table X: Two disparate Theories-in-Use

Model I Theory-in-Use	Model II Theory-in-Use
<p>Caring, help, and support Give approval and praise to other people. Tell others what you believe will make them feel good about themselves. Reduce their feelings of hurt by telling them how much you care and, if possible, agree with them that the others acted improperly.</p>	<p>Increase the others' capacity to confront their ideas, to create a window into their minds, and to face their unsurfaced assumptions, biases, and fears by acting in these ways toward other people.</p>
<p>Respect for others Defer to other people and do not confront their reasoning or actions.</p>	<p>Attribute to other people a high capacity for self-reflection and self-examination without becoming so upset that they lose their effectiveness and their sense of self-responsibility and choice. Keep testing this attribution (openly).</p>

Kallio (2006) has recently described a very similar phenomenon to the above, which he describes in terms of tacit "taboos" on certain subjects in discourses of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The three taboos he identifies are a) a taboo on the topic of amoral business goals (à la Friedman, 1962), b) a taboo on the topic of continuous economic growth and c) a taboo on discussing the political nature of CSR, by which Kallio means the competitive and strategic pursuit of individual goals, or economic advantage.

2 Competing discourses

The "New Work Order" as described by Gee, Lankshear, and Hull (1996; see also Sarangi and Roberts, 1999: 9-10) has produced a whole new range of workplace tensions. For workers there are new responsibilities that reflect the demands of a newly textualised workplace, new kinds of literacy and new sites of communication. The so-called Karpin report in Australia on new management needs (*Enterprising Nation*, 1995) maps out many of the same ideas and developments, from a managerial viewpoint.

Watson was one of the first researchers to describe the dilemmas facing managers in the new work order, and he described them explicitly in terms of competing discourses (in his book: *In Search of Management: Culture, Chaos and Control in Managerial Work*, 1994, 2001). Watson's insights (like his data) are based on a year's participant observation in a large UK company that had been taken over by another firm with a very different organisational "culture". Managers had to reconcile a discourse of empowerment, skills and growth that they had inherited from their original employer with a new, imported discourse of control, jobs and costs (with associated tasks, such as 'selecting people for redundancy' or 'losing heads'). At the same time, and to further complicate matters, the managers also had to juggle an evolving and adaptive discourse of personal identity ('the sort of person I am'). Similarly conflicted situations are described for a newly appointed team leaders in rapidly "textualising" manufacturing companies (Scheers, 1999; Iedema and Scheeres, 2003).

Iedema (2003), in his *Discourses of Post-Bureaucratic Organisations*, and subsequently in a jointly written paper (Iedema et al., 2004) describes research carried out into the changing discourses and discursive practices of New South Wales hospitals, where a "clinical pathways" system has been introduced. Multi-disciplinary teams now come together regularly, in meetings chaired by a new class of doctor-manager, to map out optimal care pathways for patients suffering from specific health problems. Iedema describes how the new doctor-managers perform their dual roles and "manage" their frequently conflicting identities, as managers and clinicians. With his colleagues, he finds that the typical doctor-manager has to be "three-ways multi-vocal," interweaving three analytically separate discourses: "the profession-specific discourse of clinical medicine, the resource-efficiency and systematization discourse of management, and an interpersonalizing discourse devoted to hedging and mitigating contradictions" (2004: 15). It is clear from the examples that this is not a conscious strategy, but a spontaneous response—albeit a "skilled" one—to the conflicting demands of the situation. I have selected several extracts from the data presented in Iedema et al. (2004) to illustrate one key strategy.

Iedema et al. explain first how, to 'manage' the tension between managerial and medical concerns, "the doctor-manager interposes a third position to buffer the first two" (2004: 25). This position involves—through countless throwaway references and formulations—displacing the implementation of the pathway initiative into the unforeseeable future (ibid.). Extracts 6 and 7 are indicative of this approach. Extract 6 contains the remark that gave Iedema and his colleagues their title for their paper (my bold-face italics):

Extract 6

[It is important] on behalf of the institution that we recognize what we're up to. ***I think it's a very useful conversation I'm hearing and it's important that we're at this point in thinking.***

Extract 7

...we're talking about having an organizational structure development workshop in June. Let's say at the end of this workshop we are sufficiently interested in pathways as a tool in managing the work and a tool for costing and acquiring the appropriate funds, all of those. If we decide to go down that track and start setting up pathways we need to form ourselves into appropriate working parties which are multi-disciplinary teams. How that fits into a structure of taking responsibility and the ability to govern the hospital we all need to consider and think about. (Workshop transcript: 41)

The reader will have noticed that the doctor-manager a) formulates the implementation of the pathways as a harmless conversation (negotiation?) and b) uses conditionals to present their options as hypothetical ones. Note also that none of this is in fact the case: the pathways are for urgent implementation.) Iedema et al.'s description of the doctor-manager's strategy here is worth quoting at some length (2004: 25):

The contradiction between the imperative to pathway the clinical work and the medical view that decision-making cannot be reduced to 'a series of steps' is diluted not only by referring its resolution into the future, but also by construing it as an innocent and resolvable matter. Thus, this workshop is not an extremely awkward debate among people whose professional views, identities, and futures are on the line. Instead, it is a 'conversation'. In addition, this 'conversation' is part of an unfolding trajectory, a form of progress: 'it's important we're at this point in thinking'. By portraying the incommensurabilities between clinical and managerial interests and concerns as an innocuous 'conversation', on the one hand, and by embedding this conversation into an unfolding trajectory of sensemaking, on the other, the doctor-manager 'manages' to recast current tensions as effects of an underdeveloped situation.

Elsewhere (2003: xi), in recognition of their difficult communicative functions, Iedema refers to the doctor-managers as "discourse absorbers" and emphasises the underlying "disjunctions and chasms" that render any response, no matter how *strategic*, ultimately futile, while suggesting that certain topics must indeed be "occluded."

Their organizational influence depends less on what they can achieve, than on how well they can mask the the disjunctions and chasms that separate the discourses that populate their organization, and continue as if there is management, as if there is organization.

3 Self-contradiction and internal conflict

Conflictual talk and self-contradictory prose often enact a deep confusion in the mind of the speaker or writer. Tracy and Coupland (1990) collected some interesting research on production difficulties that arise when speakers are juggling multiple discourse goals. However, contextualised examples of business discourse marred by competing aims are somewhat rare. Bavelas, Black, Chovil and Mullett (in Tracy and Coupland, 1990) remains a seminal paper, albeit espousing an experimental rather than an ethnographic methodology, as it deals with effects of conflicting goals on discourse such as deception and *equivocation*. Galasinski () is also good on equivocation in politicians' talk.

El-Sawad, Arnold and Cohen (2004) have demonstrated just how prevalent self-contradiction is in accounts of organizational life. However, they found that the organisational members interviewed for their study usually succeeded in keeping their different goals, attitudes and discourses cognitively separated in a process the authors refer to as "double-think" (a phrase they borrowed from Orwell, 1984). Thus there was no evidence of contradiction *within the same utterance*. Musson and Duberley (2007) show how different supervisors in a UK manufacturing organisation engage very differently with the official discourse of participation, in the context of ongoing organisational change, but again the diversity is only evident across – not within – individuals. On the other hand, while many supervisors adhere to the managerial discourse of participation in formal settings, they express critical and even resistant views in private, backstage interaction. But what about conflict in the actual production of talk? Iedema et al. (2004) note that their data show "that the doctor-manager positions himself *across* these discourses and manages their inherent incommensurabilities before a heterogeneous audience *and on occasions even within the one utterance*" (2003, 15). However, even with some latitude as to how one defines

an utterance, it is rather difficult to find authentic examples of this phenomenon as taken from business or organisational contexts.

Below I give some examples from transcript data collected by Eric Healey and contained in a Masters research dissertation submitted in 2006 (unpublished), where the linguistic evidence of conflicting motives is clear and abundant. The parties to the exchanges below are Stan and Terry, agents representing two manufacturing companies linked in a supply-chain relationship. Terry's firm provide parts that are used by Stan's firm in assembling certain products. Stan has had to ring Terry to ask for assurances about his firm's ability to deliver a certain quantity of overdue parts to a certain standard by a certain date. In Stan's contributions a conflict is evident between the imperative to adhere to the "involvement obligations" of the interaction order (see Goffman, 1967) and the need to put trust on the line in the interests of an underlying business relationship.

Stan's turns are marked by production difficulties, such as marked pauses and false starts, by hypermitigation, and by hybridized speech acts (where orders are transformed into requests, for example, as they are being constructed). He fluctuates between inclusive uses of the first person plural pronoun *we* and more distancing use of *you* as he not only suggests how Terry might attempt to placate Marion (Stan's line manager, to whom Terry is ultimately accountable), *he also simulates addressing her, as Terry might, recounting exculpatory events, just as Terry might*. After cementing solidarity and mutuality in this way, he feels able to express his own concerns about Terry's frankness about his firm's ability to supply the needed goods at the requisite rate. In the following, Stan's suggestions about the "line" Terry might take with Marion is underlined with a broken line, his simulated talk is underlined with an unbroken line, and the halting expression of his own concerns is shaded.

Uh he I think you're right Terry I think **we** do have to ... get on the phone with Marilyn and let her know **we** have an issue. You know um I think that that if it were jst..ya know the fact that **you**'ve run into a quality issue..**you**'ve rejected a lot of parts I think **you** could sell that on the basis that **we**'re doing...**you** could sell that on the basis that **we**'re doing as much as is distasteful..as much as you don't wanna hear it ya know ah customer... but ya know **we** ... ya know **we**..e... there was a minor blemish and **we**'re just not prepared to release that not on the first shipment and that's affecting this production rate. But what concerns me Terry i..[sigh].. is...wi::ll we...be.. ya know will we.. do you feel comfortable that we're going to be able to move from this point forward.. aand... first off hit eh hit these rates and these rates by the way are not are not consistent with what ... Clemmons really needs.

Note the numerous repetitions and false starts in the shaded portion of Stan's talk; the request for an expression of affect ("do you feel comfortable that ...") as a token of sincerity, to strengthen the requested prediction about production; and at the end the almost parenthetical acknowledgement that Terry's firm's production rates are already below what is required by Stan's firm, Clemmons.

It is worth noting Iedema's own writing in *Discourses of Postbureaucratic Organizations* (2003) displays a degree of ambivalence and self-contradiction with regard to the change phenomena he is describing (indeed see the quotations from Iedema et al., 2004, and Iedema, 2003, above). Where Scheeres (1999) often emphasizes the benefits and opportunities available to workers in the new communicative workplace, Iedema seems torn between an acceptance of these benefits and opportunities and a recognition of its many downsides of the new work order for ordinary, unskilled and semi-skilled blue-collar workers, as well as for those less skilled in the new "technologies of interaction" (Scheeres, 2003).

Discussion

In 1992, Sarangi and Slembrouck argued that applied linguistics and discourse analysis needed to go beyond the examination of situated interactions and the immediate discourse situation and to take account of "societal factors" and to examine "the correlations between participants' socioeconomic interests, their social identities, the social and situational powers they (do not) possess, their expectations about activities, etc. on the one hand, and principled forms of language use, on the other" (1992: 117). Their explicit aim was a social pragmatics within which institutional orders of discourse (as opposed to the interactional one) could be adequately explicated. Ten years later, Chris Candlin, addressing the [Association for Business Communication's](#) European Convention, called more specifically for "studies where analysis of business discourses [is] linked to analysis of influencing external social movements and forces" (Candlin, 2002).

Since 1992, a considerable literature has developed – in and around the burgeoning field of Critical Discourse Analysis –which constitutes a sociologically informed linguistic critique of the new corporate and workplace discourses of advanced capitalist economies. In 1992, Fairclough published *Discourse and Social Change*. 1996, Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) published an important critique of *The New Work Order*, linking

the changed workplace contexts of post-fordist production and fast capitalism to an emphasis on communication skills, team skills and distributed knowledge, and increasing levels of responsibility and accountability for even unskilled workers. Watson (1994/2001) was (unusually) based on participant observation and described conflicting managerial discourses in a newly merged organisation in the UK. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) dealt in a big-picture way with *Discourse in Late Modernity*, while Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) focused on the new management ideology. However, this was not what Sarangi and Slembrouck (1992) actually called for. Sarangi and Slembrouck, like Habermas, are concerned both with more "universal" communicative processes and, at the same time, with communicative actions—and discourses in use—as intrinsically local and contingent phenomena, reflecting very general orientations to sociation and communication as well as "the social positions of the speaking and listening subjects and the societal anchoring of activity-type specific norms for information exchange" (1992: 140).

As noted above, much in the extant literature on communication and/or discourse in business organisations presupposes the existence of competing interests, and conflicted or distorted communication but, in the same breath, establishes that these can be contained and even harnessed by managers and owners (see Kerosuo & Engeström, 2003, on the notion of "productive resistance"). Eisenberg assumed the existence of disparate viewpoints, divergent interpretations, and conflicting goals or interests in organisations (Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg and Goodall, 1997; Eisenberg and Witten, 1987), but showed how strategic ambiguity could function to reconcile and domesticate all these, promoting 'unified diversity' by allowing multiple viewpoints and interpretations to coexist and fostering agreement on abstractly formulated issues. This is also the stance of Leitch & Davenport (2007), who also stress the uses of ambiguity in the service of organisational "sustainability" – "allowing divergent objectives to coexist and allowing ideologically diverse groups to work together or at least "in parallel" (Leitch & Davenport, 2007).

However, there is also the "sense-making" literature, which views discursive conflict as a necessary and even constitutive element in the life of organisations. The "empirical struggles around meaning" that (according to Grant, Hardy, Osrick, and Putnam, 2004) take place in—and to some extent constitute—organisations, are (for the most part) enacted discursively. In an Introduction to the *Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, these authors argue (2004: 22) that

... organizations do not start out 'possessing' meaning; instead, meanings are created and contested as a result of discursive interactions among organizational actors and organizational publics with different interests (Mumby and Clair 1997). As a result, a dominant meaning often emerges as alternative discourses are subverted or marginalized.

This view of discourse represents a politically sensitive reformulation of what Clifford Geertz meant when (following Weber) he declared that "Man" with all his concerns is "suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (1973, 5). Unfortunately, as we have learned, these are often very tangled webs. Large-scale configurations of meanings have evolved and become extremely coherent, i.e. systematic, over the centuries; these are inherited and go for the most part unquestioned. Others, on a more human scale, are invented and deliberately propagated. These have the function of webs—they are designed to ensnare. They embody and enact an ethos of strategic, goal-oriented action. The student of discourse uncovers patterns of meaning (some more, some less systemic; some more, some less deliberately strategic) while investigating patterns of communication and discourse. Business discourse is, clearly, on the whole, oriented towards results or success, and because it is competitive it is strategic. Strategy can be conscious or unconscious but even in the latter case it is systematic. Members of business organizations, whether owners, managers or employees, also inhabit the lifeworld. Their discourse typically enacts a conscious or unconscious struggle to combine the two value spheres.

Conclusion

Essentially, then, if we want to understand the ways in which language, discourse, and communicative action more generally, is used to further certain interests—such as the business interests of individual and organisations—or to promote understanding, agreement, and mere intersubjectivity, we need to look far beyond the types of analysis of social context that have traditionally been seen as important and sufficient by sociolinguists and discourse practitioners. This will, of course, mean grasping the thorn of non-cooperative communication and strategic communication (which is always in some sense deceptive). Teachers and trainers working in the field of business communication can approach this issue indirectly, by focusing on dynamic models with competing demands or imperatives acting on individual speakers or writers (as exemplified in Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2003). Researchers, too, can expect to develop models that account for the dynamic tensions that pervade much human communication when viewed through the lens of an emergent social pragmatics. Business owners and managers will benefit from an awareness that sustainable levels of "success" will be only achieved through their ability to

align legitimate competing interests with their own. Habermas recognised that communicative action and strategic action contain elements of each other (1984: 331). Business discourse can thus hypothetically combine the goal of understanding and recognising people and interests that are potentially in opposition to one's own interests, and the goal of a mutually beneficial alignment based on communication that is both genuine and—openly—strategic.

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