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Internal organizational discourse in English

Telling corporate stories
For Heather, Gianni and my mother
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Given this, I have to say, having collaborated closely with a number of universities both in Italy and northern Europe on the business themes elaborated here, that I truly believe that the most significant academic work can only be a group effort, at the end of the day. Finally, my warmest gratitude to my friend and colleague, Rita Salvi, for her long-standing support, continuous optimism and encouragement, and of course, her incomparable critical eye.
The first clarification I wish to make lies in the choice of the title of the book and my own objectives in reporting these studies. The approach used in this work is primarily linguistic, and entails the application of models, methods and descriptive–explanatory frameworks to the organizational data which I have been collecting for over ten years as a scholar, first and foremost, of language, texts, genres and discourse, although my work to date has not been exclusively concentrated in any one particular field. At the same time, my developing interests in business and organizational discourse and the felt need for a strongly–rooted connection with both organization and management experts and with the providers of the data themselves, have led me far deeper into the contextual parameters of this research than I would have imagined ten years ago. The outcome of this symbiosis has taken its shape in this book.

This personal orientation to the material also has an epistemological raison d’être. It is fair to say that there has been a linguistic upturn in social studies in general in recent years (Bargiela–Chiappini’s collection of studies, 2009, makes repeated reference to this), reflected in increasing recognition of the central role of language and discourse in the construction of social realities. This holds equally for the field of organizational studies. On the other hand, a large number of discourse studies, treated within a qualitative analytical framework, have as a prime objective, the placing of textual analysis within more systematically–revealed socio–cultural contexts. Conceptualizations of socially–derived “genres” are being located at far higher levels than those used at the onset of genre analysis two or three decades ago. Indeed, the very notion of genre itself as a well–defined and definable construct fits far less easily with new social practices, as the findings of this book indicate. Hence, Bhatia’s use of the term “interdiscursivity” (2010) has been adopted as one of the guiding notions of this work in the belief that professional genres and professional practices complement each other, and that
Introduction
discourse is derived from and situated in professional practice. What is basic to the studies reported in this book, then, is the attempt to make connections between language, discourse and professional practice.

The acknowledgement of this premise has led many discourse scholars to extend the scope of their descriptions in order to arrive at an integrated account of language and professional practices. At the same time, this entails a widening of analytical scope, applying new methods and approaches to the data being treated. This book draws on integrated methodologies, using multi–faceted, blended techniques together with a great deal of interdisciplinary research partnership with organizational studies and management experts. The methods outlined in each of the chapters of the book describe the particular “mix” which is appropriate for the topics under review: with the exception of chapter 4, an objective quantitative component is included, using the now standard tools of corpus linguistics. However, this is very often only a starting point for the application of other methodologies: for example, those relevant for conversational, interactional and narrative analysis are essential for many of the descriptions. At the same time, classic linguistic frameworks, such as Halliday’s *Systemic Functional Grammar* (1994), are complemented with newly–developing models and theories in areas such as metaphor studies, visual media analysis, relevance, inference and sense–making accounts, relational pragmatics and cognitively–grounded explanations of linguistic usage, in order to provide much–extended explanatory power, in the Chomskian sense, to the findings.

The implications of the above also have an impact on the type and quantity of data which is considered suitable for studies such as these. In order to conduct research into organizational communications in a multi–dimensional framework, and using the approach outlined above, it has been necessary to compile a substantial amount of empirically rich, authentic multi–medial and multimodal material. The corpus I am using is self–compiled, transcribed and categorized into sub–corpora of various kinds, as shown in the diversification across the chapters: it totals around 1,000,000 words. The source is the same throughout: a large multinational group based in North America, a global leader in organizational consulting. The material I have selected to investigate internal company communications consists of power point slide series, management audio–conferences, on–line “webinars”
for corporate updates, in–house training and development sessions, and e–newsletters, to name the most important types. At the same time, I have been able to develop relationships with company executives, managers and employees over a ten–year period. I have had the opportunity to hear their stories, interview them and ask them to write down their own accounts of their experiences and feelings. This ethnographic input is indispensable to confirm or question claims that are made on a strictly linguistic basis (about trust issues, or the topic of corporate self–image, for example).

The second part of the book title, *telling corporate stories*, also requires some explanation as it is a central theme of the research reported here. The choice of the word *stories* does not carry any connotation of falseness or mendacity—on the contrary it is recognition of the essential depth of subjectivity of experience, and the role of personalized interpretations and evaluations of participant stance, positionings and “voices” in the creation of roles and identities. *Storytelling* and narration create single and collective meanings and understandings of organizational practices, *story* acting as a generalized mega–metaphor for inter–relational practices. As the noted scholars of business discourse, Aritz and Walker, put it

> Organization is not a pre–discursive social entity reflected in language, rather the organization is talked into being through a set of relational understandings enabled and enacted through discourse. (Artitz and Walker 2012: 268)

We noted earlier the trend towards discursive approaches to organization studies and *vice versa* the importance of these studies in business discourse analysis (Aritz and Walker, 2012, provide a concise overview). A major linking theme in the above–mentioned collection is the authors’ distinction between little *d*–discourse (oriented to language and social interaction in local settings) and big *D*–Discourse (which embraces the wider contexts, the construal of social reality through language and broader issues related to the shaping of socio–cultural knowledge systems). The work reported here attempts to incorporate both layers of context. It tries to locate the macro–context in the organizational communications, placing the *D* within the *d*, (linking professional practice to the processes of globalization and technologi-
cal innovation). The obverse is also a source of explanation, tracing the potential for larger socio–cultural shift afforded by local language use (for example the relationship between channels, modes and discourse and their relevance in newly–developing digital forms of expression).

Throughout the development of the book, different corporate stories are recounted with varying characters and protagonists, plots and themes, events and time frames, and final evaluative coda. The intrinsically persuasive nature of the narratives emerges, as language is used to create a positive organizational self–image, a healthy corporate culture and a solid relationship with all “place–holders” in the organization. Relationship–building is tracked between top corporate members and management; executives, managers and the workforce; and between employees on a peer–to–peer basis. Linguistic indexicality is the focus of the investigation into the shape these different, but overlapping, stories take.

Chapter 1 deals with the technological evolution in the channels, modes and instrumentalities used in contemporary internal organizational information dissemination, their relative features and the particular opportunities they provide business communications. Three sub–corpora are analysed using three main data types, audio–conferenced presentations, their accompanying visual software (power point slide sequences) and e–newsletters, to throw light on the language features intrinsic to the blending of modes and inter–mediality. The reflexivity of language comes to the fore, linguistic features being both a product of channels and an active vehicle for the reinforcement of their inherent constraints and affordances.

Chapter 2 looks at “the corporate story”, as told by the main protagonists of corporate messaging in internal communications, the executive and managerial participants. The focus is on the organization’s efforts to display timely, transparent and relevant leadership in the performance of company rebranding and reinvention, based on the fast–changing realities of the global market place. The main communicative function is referential, focusing on the creation and sharing of information in the knowledge–able organization. We shall see how the macro–functions of exposition and argumentation are realized in highly mobile virtual environments, and how language transforms this space into a well–inhabited place by the corporate and executive presence: linguistic forms and patterns, proximal deixis being one
of the main semantico–pragmatic resources, work to establish relevance and locally–situated contextualization, creating the anchoring, the “grounding”, in “unboundedness” in a temporal–spatial dialectic.

Chapter 3 takes a different turn in corporate narrative, featuring the relationships between management and employees, and the construal of a corporate culture where the inclusion of learning priorities and innovation management take centre–stage. The organizational discourse in this story is characterized by inter–textuality in the form of complex networks of metaphor and figurative language, embedding educationally–related orders of discourse and thus re–contextualizing the corporate language of business processes. The upshot of these discursive efforts is that the diverse “Communities of Practice” existing within the organization become unified and widened into a single, united “Community of Learning”, through the persuasive force of affectively–charged language, the “language of learning”.

Chapter 4 looks at discourse creation between peers in relationships, which are marked by a significant degree of symmetry in status, power and authority. The chapter looks at how these relationships are managed discursively, and how employee stories contribute to the construction of corporate cultural values and practices, from the bottom up. Using a series of in–house, peer training sessions, interactional, involvement strategies can be assessed in the creation of employee self–image, professional roles and identity. Different orders of discourse illocutions emerge, at macro and micro levels, centring on directive, narrative and affective functions. In particular, the pragmatic value of the imperative mood and direct speech is explored, together with the varying functions of inclusive humour. The chapter finishes with a proposal for a dynamical model correlating the co–ordinates of interactive–interpretive space with authority–status positioning in order to better understand relational co–construction, image management and solidarity–trust work.

Chapter 5 describes work in progress and future research perspectives.