Taking the Linguistic Turn in Organizational Research

Challenges, Responses, Consequences

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This article takes the linguistic turn, or turns, in the social sciences as its point of departure and discusses the implications for methodology, empirical research, and field practices in social and organizational studies. Various responses can be identified: grounded fictionalism, giving up the hope of making substantive, empirical claims in terms of research texts capturing social phenomena; data-constructionism, where the ambiguous and constructed nature of empirical material gives space for a more relaxed, freer, and bolder way of interacting with empirical material; and discursivism, in which the researcher concentrates on the details of empirical material that lends itself to representations in the form of language, for example, conversations and texts. The article develops some ideas for a more reflective way of dealing with language issues in empirical social research. It argues for a more discourse-near but not discourse-exclusive approach to organizational research and refers to this as discursive pragmatism.

One of the most profound contemporary trends within the social sciences is the increased interest in and focus on language. In disciplines closely related to organizational theory, such as sociology (Atkinson, 1992; Lash, 1990), social psychology (Gergen, 1985; Hollway, 1989; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Shotter, 1993; Shotter & Gergen, 1989), communication theory (Deetz, 1992, 1994; Mumby & Stohl, 1991), and cultural anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988, 1997; Marcus &

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Fischer, 1986), researchers rethink and reclaim their various subjects from textual and linguistic points of view. Despite diverse backgrounds, these scholars express a shared message. They suggest that the proper understanding of societies, social institutions, identities, and even cultures may be viewed as discursively constructed ensembles of texts.

There is no doubt that many organizational researchers are listening and pondering the consequences of a linguistic turn in the field of organizational studies. This is not surprising, given that one obvious metaphor for organizations is to view them as texts. This is also becoming increasingly popular, as word usage in recent research publications reveals: Linstead and Grafton-Small (1992) invite us to the mysteries of reading organizational cultures, Cooper (1989) and Calás and Smircich (1991) elaborate on writing organizations, Martin (1990) and others deconstruct organizational events, Sköldberg (1991) explores genres of organizational reform, Czarniawska-Joerges (1997) dissects organizational narratives, and Jeffcutt (1993)—adding a touch of reflexivity—analyzes genres of writing on organizations.

It is clear that contemporary organizational analysis is being subjected to a linguistic turn. This is reflected in recent debates on postmodernism (Alvesson, 1995; Chia, 1995; Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997; Knights, 1997; Parker, 1992) and in postobjectivist hermeneutical research strategies in organizational analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1999; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Jeffcutt, 1993). The debates on postmodernism have, if nothing else, brought the power, capacities, and—above all—the complexities of language to the forefront of academic debate.

However, conventional conceptions of social reality and its relation to language, which is precisely what is at stake, are not only challenged by ideas stemming from the domain of speculative thought. Students of linguistic behavior—discourse analysts,[1] for example—have equally disturbing stories to tell. Armed with the empiricist method par preference—observations in natural settings—they come back and inform us that (a) people do not use language primarily to make accurate representations of perceived objects but, rather, to accomplish things, and (b) the variety of means employed to achieve these accomplishments are vastly underestimated in conventional research (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Both postmodernists and discourse analysts point out a central weakness in the conventional understanding of the relation between language and social reality: that it privileges the idea that language represents reality. The postmodern argument highlights the theoretical problems with this view; for example, how can one know that the statement A truthfully represents the thing T? Discourse analysts show that an emphasis on the representational capacities of language conceal and obfuscate the more productive question of its creative and functional capacities: what language use actually accomplishes. The statement A may or may not represent the thing T, but why is the statement A produced in the first place, and what does it accomplish?

However, few, if any, have considered the thrust of the combined argument of postmodernism and discourse analysis and its full consequences for methodology, empirical research, and fieldwork practices.[2] In particular, the profound problems with a traditional view of language—that words represent and correspond to objects,

whether they are of people's inner lives (intentions, cognitions, values, feelings) or external lives (social practices, interactions, relations)—create far-reaching implications for methodology and research. This article attempts to explore and elaborate these consequences. The article also attempts to suggest principles for research practices consistent with and informed by significant versions of the linguistic turns in organizational analysis.

THE PROBLEM: LANGUAGE CANNOT MIRROR SOCIAL REALITY

It is possible that everybody in academia knows that language is not a simple medium for the transport of meaning. At least everybody knows that language is complicated. But working and writing as if the idea or ideal that language may be a medium for the transport of meaning seems to be common in social science. Some researchers insist on the use of literal language. They wish to avoid metaphors or limit their use to the initial, generative phase of research (cf. Pinder & Bourgeois, 1982; Tsoukas, 1991; for a counterargument, see Morgan, 1983). In almost all empirical research, the research design and the research text are developed and written as if language is strictly controlled by the researcher, a simple tool through which she or he mirrors the world. This is most obvious in quantitative studies.

The great majority of qualitative work follows a similar logic. The difference is typically that qualitative research takes greater interest in the level of meaning and seeks to provide space for research participants to express their opinions through their own words. In being able to choose the words themselves, the research participants are presumed to communicate their feelings, thoughts, values, experiences, and observations in a way that renders their inner worlds accessible to the researcher. Interview statements, for example, are seen as reflections of these inner worlds and, if the level of meaning is not in focus, of reality "out there." It is assumed that language and language use represent something other than themselves.

The researcher, following this mirror logic, collects data and builds a case on these data, often excluding material that is considered irrelevant or of low quality. In qualitative research, researchers present selected portions to prove their case. In quantitative studies, statistical data and correlations are presented as if these offer a window to conditions beyond the questionnaire-filling situation. Given methodologically competent research practice, the language use of informants (questionnaire respondents) is viewed as a reliable indicator of the issues in which the researcher is interested.

The lack of interest in language and the implicit treatment of it as a transparent medium for the communication of knowledge (data, meaning) is apparent in, for example, writings on case study methodology (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Hartley, 1994; Stake, 1994). Many problems and pitfalls are mentioned, but language is rarely discussed. Eisenhardt (1989), in a widely cited article, refers to the observing researchers getting empirical evidence without language complicating matters. Expressions such as the "objective eye," "convergent perceptions," and "the convergence of observa-

tions from multiple investigators enhances confidence in the findings" and the claim, for example, that triangulation provides "stronger substantiation of constructs and hypothesis" (p. 538) indicate that social reality is open for inspection. But if language is central for observation and interpretation and if observations often concern linguistic behavior (the study of material and body movements is typically insufficient for organizational research), then language complicates the picture heavily. Divergence/ convergence in researchers' observations and/or the accounts produced by interviewees may be an outcome of language use rather than a direct outcome of social reality. People may use different words to refer to the same thing, and they may produce similar accounts when referring to different experienced realities. This is perhaps trivial to point out, but it is frequently neglected in social research.

Most qualitative and almost any quantitative research publication will illustrate this. Wayne, Shore, and Liden (1997), for example, tried to measure "perceived organizational support" through responses to questions such as "management shows very little concern for me" (p. 96). Of course, how to interpret this statement is not obvious. One may ask, Who is "management," and What is meant by "shows," "very little," "concern," and "me," here? "Management" may be read as the top managers, the immediate superior, or something else. "Concern" may be read as a genuine, altruistic, and/or paternalistic interest or as the consideration of instrumental issues, such as productivity or competence. "Me" may be understood as a unique individual or as a representative of a social category ("my kind of person"). A formulation such as "very little" may trigger all kinds of reactions, perhaps saying less about "perceived organizational support," and more about cultural norms for what is appropriate. "Very little" may be read as a failure to live up to reasonable standards, and the response may be seen as a moral opinion. The results may be more indicative of norms for the expression of moral opinion than anything else. Similar doubts can be raised about almost any effort to measure various research items. It is important to emphasize that it is by no means self-evident that language can work as a simple tool for measuring reality and that mainstream research nevertheless treats it in this way and includes nothing about reflection of the problems and complexities of language.

Another example illustrates the point on a more specific level. Ely (1995) studied the construction of female gender identities in law firms. She concluded that the increased presence of women had an effect on men: "For example, one participant from a sex-integrated firm believed that the presence of women actually freed men from the need to engage in some stereotypically male behavior." She quotes the participant:

> Women bring something to an all male institution when you integrate it. . . . I think that men, when they run in packs, tend to act like small boys. I think there's a lot of pecking-order-establishing and one-ups-manship and bravado. And I think women reduce the need for that somewhat. (p. 613)

Ely is careful in her interpretation. She uses expressions such as "there was some sense" and "one participant believed." However, the various statements and questionnaire responses lead to conclusions such as "the proportional representation of women

in positions of power affects the professional women's gender identity at work" (p. 625). Here, we are dealing with an objective fact, the text claims. But, one may doubt whether the accounts used as indicators of gender identity stand in a clear relationship to the constructed identities existing beyond the talk about them. In the first quotation, Ely refers to a belief about the good effects of women on male behavior. Strictly speaking, we can say that one woman provided an account that may or may not reflect a firm and stable belief. The account is interesting in itself: It portrays men as small boys when in a group context and in need of the presence of women in order to mature. The account—produced in an interaction between two women—may be understood as oriented toward promoting a feeling of community (we women do good things for men and organizational life through our very presence) and be seen as politically motivated (promoting the careers of women) as much as a reflection of a belief about "how it is" (Alvesson & Deetz, 1999).

It is important to remember that these two cases exemplify research carried out by highly competent researchers and published through well-reputed channels. Ely's piece, in particular, is more careful and thoughtful in grounding her conclusions. The problem is that, in common with the work of a great majority of organizational and social researchers, there is a shared oversimplistic understanding of language and language use. This view of language may be the only feasible option given conventional research tasks, such as targeting broad issues where interviews and questionnaires are used to mirror external realities. But, perhaps, research tasks may be reconsidered so that they become less ambitious in scope and more ambitious in terms of rigor and thoughtfulness concerning the linguistic dimension.

There are few examples of studies not following this simple language-as-mirror logic, except when the research focus is explicitly on language and language use in social contexts. Normally, the mirror view does not appear as clearly problematic—the problems are effectively concealed in, for example, questionnaire items forcing respondents to reply in a highly constrained way. However, in a questionnaire-based study of work satisfaction and organizational commitment among U.S. and Japanese workers, Lincoln and Kalleberg (1985) found that the U.S. respondents scored higher. This is obviously not in line with conventional wisdom, so the authors speculate whether the responses to these issues reflect national cultural conventions of expression rather than the true level of satisfaction and commitment. A one point, language use triggers some doubts on the mirror view. However, in the rest of the article, such doubts do not surface. This is normal practice in research work, at least as it appears in empirical articles in leading journals. The material is seldom interpreted as speech acts oriented to reproduce wider or deeper social conventions in language usage. There is a reflexive deficit regarding language in highly significant parts of social science, in methodology as well as in empirical studies.

The present article should be read against the background of the continuing domination of the language-as-mirror practice. In pragmatic contexts, such as the composition and use of train timetables and the counting of people, the view of language as a mirror of reality has practical advantages and functions. In social sciences, studying complex phenomena constituted within a specific vocabulary, this is frequently not the case.

THE LINGUISTIC TURNS IN
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

As noted above, texts and language have come to the forefront in social and organizational research in several ways. We will focus on and elaborate three significant areas: the language itself, language in use, and the production of research texts.[3]

One focus is on language itself, its very nature, and the possibilities and impossibilities that it brings with it. Against a conventional view of language as a transparent medium for the transport of meaning, critics have emphasized its ambiguous, metaphorical, context-dependent, and active nature. Postmodernists and poststructuralists argue (Cooper, 1989; Deetz, 1992) that language is a system of distinction, building on the repression of hidden meanings; efforts to say something definite, to establish how things are, rely on shaky foundations and ought to be deconstructed. This includes showing the false robustness of, and the contradictions in, the repressed meanings of statements. Other authors emphasize how language and understanding are fused with, and indeed rely on, metaphors. Language, as a vital part both of our cognitions and of our basic way of relating to the world, is metaphorical (Brown, 1977; Morgan, 1980, 1983).

A second focus is on language in use—how it works in the real world. Language is viewed as an empirical phenomenon that occurs in the accounts and conversations produced by people in various contexts. Empirical work calls for accessible phenomena. If the representational capacity of language is in doubt or denied, then the study of language use is what is left as robust and reliably replicated empirical phenomena. The productive, functional, interactive, and context-dependent nature of all language use—including research interviews—is believed to be central. The perspective includes, for example, discourse analysis as developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987) (see also Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1997) and ethnomethodology and conversational analysis (Silverman, 1993). Although this focus to some extent draws upon the general critique of a mirror view of language, the interest is not to produce philosophical investigations of the nature of language but to study social practices—language use—in social contexts.

A third important focus is on the research process itself and, in particular, the production of texts. The writing of a research report is no longer a routine dispassionate account, for the construction of a credible text is viewed as an extremely complex enterprise. As such, it stands in an ambiguous relationship with any observations or experiences of the social reality as perceived by the researcher. This focus has been most pronounced among anthropologists and other ethnographers (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1997) but has reached a wider impact and also has affected organizational studies (Jeffcutt, 1993; Van Maanen, 1995). Whereas fieldwork has traditionally been viewed as the crucial aspect of ethnographic research, the emphasis has changed so that text work is now seen as being an equally critical focus of attention (Geertz, 1988). Genre, rhetoric, and style have been brought to the fore. Reflection on how a persuasive, authoritative account is put together is a vital part of ethnographic research (Atkinson, 1992; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988; Van Maanen, 1988; Watson, 1994). There are obvious parallels between the researcher's situation and the

informant's or interviewee's situation: The production of an account is a complex accomplishment that needs to be understood in its own terms. Accounts are, as stated above, more than simple mirrors of experiences, observations, and insights relating to the world out there or even of personal, subjective realities such as feelings or meanings.

Language as a Shaping Force

These illustrations show how, for some, language has radically changed from being a simple tool for theorizing and measuring to becoming the crucial issue in social research. Granted, this transformation has occurred in a rich variety of ways. Language is now viewed as

1. an active, autonomous, and productive mode of expression;
2. the central object of study in social science;
3. a rhetorical device for the creation of a credible research text;
4. the very stuff researchers work and struggle with;
5. a carrier of power through its ability to order and constitute the social world; and
6. a vehicle for the potential critical clarification of social issues.

The range is wide, and many of the turns go partly in different and antagonistic directions. Nevertheless, all share the conviction that language is poorly understood if viewed as a simple medium for the mirroring of objective reality through passively transporting data. Language use, in any social context, is active, processual, and outcome oriented. Language is used to persuade, enjoy, engage, discipline, criticize, express feelings, clarify, unite, do identity work, and so on. It constructs reality in the sense that every instance of language use is to some extent arbitrary and produces a particular version of what is it supposed to represent. Language is also context dependent. The same statement may have different meanings. For instance, the statement "It is 9 o'clock" may mean blame ("You are late"), a signal to start a meeting, a response to a question, or a signal to prepare for the coordination of action through the synchronization of time: The intended meaning is context dependent. This is hardly novel, but it has far-reaching implications for the possibilities of abstract definition and generalization.

More complex language use is situation dependent in much more complex ways. This means that one cannot simply compare or aggregate meanings emerging in different contexts. Terms such as *leader, decentralization, hierarchy, strategic, motives, participation, decision,* and so on do not have abstract, context-free meanings. The leader, for example, may write memos, listen, yell, give and take advice, and underscore norms. The leader may be a Girl Scout senior, an SS officer, Mahatma Gandhi, or a middle-level bureaucrat. Abstract definitions of leadership—in themselves seldom informative—say little about the specifics involved in these different situations (Alvesson, 1996b). The accounts of informants in a case study may mean that *leader* and *leadership* mean very different things every time the words are put into action. *Leader* does not just indicate a state of affairs: Through labeling somebody a leader, a particular version of the world is created, with political effects.

A RECONSTRUCTION OF RESEARCH OPTIONS IN SOCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

The various linguistic turns discussed above proceed from different points of departure and research interests. Consequently, they arrive at different implications for social research. They all offer powerful arguments against the naive view of language as a mirror of an external social reality or someone's inner world, either in terms of shared meanings or of personally held beliefs, ideas, and worldviews. Each of the critiques motivates a revision of the conventional understandings of social research. Taken together, they provide strong reasons for changes in points of departure, methodologies, and research practices. In this section, we explore potentially fruitful paths for the development of language-conscious organizational and social studies. These are grounded fictionalism, two versions of data constructionism, and discursivism. We also present a modest attempt toward synthesis—discursive pragmatism—that is particularly tuned to the specific demands of organizational research (see Table 1 for a summary).

We discuss the approaches from an empirical point of view.[4] The focus is on how other people's realities (including linguistic behavior) are used as an input in research efforts and to what extent the approaches identified accept the distinctions between different realities as valid. Put another way, we analyze the approaches from whether they accept the distinction between first-order concepts (which consist of the vocabulary of a particular group) and second-order concepts (which minimally consist of the researchers' vocabularies on the vocabulary of the group under study) (cf. Geertz, 1973; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipaddi, 1994) and what they make of it.

Grounded Fictionalism

Although many discourse analysts respond to the complexities of language with a rigorous empirical research agenda, others see the implications of the focus on language leading in the opposite direction. For example, postmodernist researchers have produced only general and vague ideas about method and empirical work (Rosenau, 1992). From this perspective, the deconstructionists, like discourse analysts, look at the details of a text, but unlike discourse analysts, they tend to bracket its social effects. They favor playfulness and imagination over rigor and empirical detail (e.g., Martin, 1990). They sometimes view statements on the emergence of the texts as another text, with no particular privilege or trustworthiness in terms of revealing the truths on how the original text emerged.[5]

Other researchers, even less interested in the details and fragility of the text, see language as a medium so different from other phenomena—"out there" in the form of institutions and practices or "in there" in the form of psychological or cultural phenomena (meanings)—that the empirical (the organizational reality out there) becomes inaccessible to research. From this point of view, it is pointless and meaningless to claim that language can communicate and reveal empirical realities. Hence, it is argued that all texts are literary accomplishments. To the extent that empirical studies

TABLE 1

Summary of Five Research Approaches Sensitive to the Linguistic Turn in Social Science

	Grounded Fictionalism	Metaphoric Data Construction	Literary Data Construction	Discursive Pragmatism	Discursivism
View on representation	Rejection	Skeptical, imperfectly possible through figurative means	Skeptical, imperfectly possible through narrative techniques	Skeptical, imperfectly possible within carefully constructed areas	Skeptical, text only
Central issue in research	Deconstruction, imaginative speculation	Metaphors	Writing style, text production	Discourse-context interaction	Text, discursive interaction
Researcher's primary task	Critique, construction of new theoretical ideas	Imaginative interpretations	Production of persuasive accounts	Reconstructing vocabularies-settings relations	Reconstructing vocabularies
Key sources of influence	Postmodernism	Burrell and Morgan (1979), Morgan (1986)	Clifford and Marcus (1986), Van Maanen (1988)	Synthesis of the other responses to the linguistic turn	Potter and Wetherell (1987)
Example of empirical study	Gergen and Gergen (1991), Martin (1990)	Smircich and Morgan (1982)	Rosen (1985)	Gronn (1983), Forester (1992)	Edwards and Potter (1992)

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exist, they exist as a literary genre. Empirical studies are, thus, structured and put together following the canons of the genre and do not address the (mythical) empirical findings that are—and can never be more than—textual artifacts.

To uncouple the text from social reality may be referred to as grounded fictionalism. This move away from traditional empirical concerns may be unavoidable if one emphasizes the impossibility of language to say something definite about something else (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). Empirical work becomes solely a matter of receiving inspiration, not of anchoring theoretical ideas, concepts, and interpretations in observation or measurement. The researcher may offer ideas, images, and vocabularies that are useful for practitioners to understand and pragmatically act upon in their worlds. Empirical work—interviewing, observing—aiming to say something beyond language use (and/or deconstruction) may be pursued, but without leading to valid representations of reality. Instead, free and creative ideas, indicating multiple realities, a plurality of possible ways of relating to these realities, become central.

Data-Constructionist Research: Two Versions

Even if one tries to adopt an ambitious attitude toward data, the complexities of data construction and the profound fictional aspects of research text production remain. There is, despite the best intentions, a rather loose relationship between what goes on "out there" and the data produced by the researcher. There is also a loose relationship between these data and the final research text. In this approach, empirical material is considered important but not as important as what is done with it. Qualities other than the robustness of data and the research design are important for judging the value of the research. This approach to research may be referred to as data-constructionist research. The idea is to take the problems of representation into consideration. The focus on the nature of language and the dynamics and politics of language as used in social settings such as interviews and (observable) naturally occurring situations means that the significance of the basic empirical data is downplayed but also that space is made for relatively bold interpretations of social phenomena.

There are two major versions of the data-constructionist approach. One emphasizes the primacy of cognitive frameworks and vocabularies of interpretation. The other frame emphasizes the literary qualities of the research text.

Metaphor-Driven Data-Constructionist Research

Paradigms and metaphors have been suggested as concepts to grasp the primacy of cognitive frameworks and vocabularies of interpretations. How the researcher paradigmatically and metaphorically structures her or his approach is, thus, crucial for what comes out of the study (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Grant & Oswick, 1996; Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1986). As Morgan (1986) puts it, "The use of metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing" (p. 12). Metaphor both draws upon and produces ambiguity. The very nature of intellectual work circles around prestructured understandings and vocabularies that guide our ways of framing and give meaning to empirical material. The constructed, perspective-dependent, and ambiguous nature of data

must be appreciated. A high degree of metaphorical consciousness becomes the cornerstone of research.

Literary Data-Constructionist Research

Another version begins at the other end and stresses the centrality of the research text. Empirical material is fitted into and subordinated to a mode of writing research. The fictional and rhetorical qualities of the research product become paramount. Genres of writing, norms of producing a text, efforts to persuade and establish authority through various rhetorical devices guide the processing and use of empirical materials in the final text. The literary qualities of research have been emphasized by an increasing number of scholars since the late 1980s (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Jeffcutt, 1993; Van Maanen, 1988, 1995). Geertz (1988), for example, suggests a move from fieldwork to text work in terms of emphasis. As with metaphorical data constructionism, literary data constructionism responds to the language problem—as well as other critiques of dataism—by reducing the ambition, seriousness, and pretense of empirical claims by framing these in specific and powerful ways.

Discursivism

Discourse analysis, as described by Potter and Wetherell (1987), proposes a distinct research program focusing on language use in specific contexts. This approach is empirical in the sense that it works with material that lends itself to representation, aims for rigor, and attends to detail. One may even refer to this research orientation as hyper-empirical. Interviews, for example, are viewed as occasions for the study of interview behavior and not as occasions for the advancement of the truth about something else. Accounts are recorded in detail, presented carefully to the reader, and studied as accounts. Discursivist research does not place validity and reliability burdens that the material cannot carry. The ideal is that empirical material shall be treated for what it is, nothing else. Statements in an interview are, for example, empirical material that say something about talk in a particular social situation. They are not indicators of what may or may not be applicable in other situations (e.g., how the interviewee feels about the workplace or leads her subordinates). (As noted above, conversational analysis is a related approach; Silverman, 1993.)

Discursive Pragmatism

The linguistic turn means that the study of nontrivial phenomena out there or cultural meanings calls for considerable modesty in terms of empirical grounding or reliance on data. It is what is done with this uncertain but still valuable empirical material that matters rather than what such material may represent. The theoretical/interpretive line of inquiry and the processing of the material in research texts enter the stage. Metaphorical or literary data-constructionist approaches thus become the obvious alternatives. As previously stated, ambiguities and contradictions in empirical material do not necessarily, or even primarily, occur because the chosen methods and procedures are poor or flawed. They occur, rather, because language is asked to do things it cannot

accomplish. Research may, however, also be conducted in a way that does not ask that much of language as a medium for the transport of knowledge about social phenomena. One implication might be that the area of analysis is limited to specific, empirical core situations such as the interview or questionnaire-filling behavior. This may be accomplished through discursivistic orientations such as discourse and conversation analysis.

However, we wish to argue for an extended and less myopic approach that allows for the communicative capacities in language but goes beyond its constructive and functional aspects. This approach may be labeled *discursive pragmatism*. The major interest remains on discursively produced outcomes, such as texts and conversations, but involves working toward interpretations beyond this specific level. In our view, the study of discourses provides a possibility to illuminate issues close to those discourses, for example, the espoused values of corporate cultures or organizational taboos (as indicated, perhaps, by people being reluctant to make statements about certain issues).

Discursive pragmatism acknowledges the multiplicity of possible meaning, the complexities of social practices, and that any attempt to claim a complete or exhaustive understanding of the phenomena under investigation is unsustainable. It is not that our understanding is poor; rather, it is that social realities are so extraordinarily rich. From this perspective, it makes more sense to attempt to capture this richness rather than make questionable claims of completeness and/or exhaustiveness. It is more fruitful to focus on particular situations—a meeting, an interaction, an event in the flow of organizational life—and elaborate its many facets rather than to try to say something—almost certainly rather thinly—about all the events and interactions spotted during fieldwork.

This, we believe, is only possible if one engages in a careful construction of the fieldwork observations with respect to practices, meanings, and talk. That is, one needs to be able to defend claims on the level of practice with observational evidence, claims on the level of meaning with ethnographic evidence, and claims on the level of talk with conversational evidence. The task is to construct illuminating and manageable portions of the realities at hand in fieldwork situations. Such careful empirical grounding also makes it possible to defend claims about the interrelations between levels. This type of deep grounding will, we think, enable the researcher to say something revealing about the specific situation under analysis but also about matters stretching beyond that situation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH PRACTICES
IN ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

In our view, the linguistic turn is of concern for organizational analysis on two levels: the level of fieldwork and the level of analysis. It is of concern for fieldwork because most data generated during fieldwork, and virtually all of the data accounted for, take on a linguistic form, one way or another. In short, most qualitative studies of organizations focus on talk. This is most evident in interviews. Similarly, with ethnographic and participant observation studies, the focus is on various types of talk

between organizational inhabitants. Studies of leadership include, for example, studying the discursive interactions between a leader and subordinates. Talk is central. One may observe the leader in noninteractive situations, but arguably, interaction exhibits wider and richer aspects of leadership. More generally, there are few occasions and events accessible to the organizational researcher that are not infused, ingrained, and embedded in talk.

There are even fewer occasions in which research results are not converted into textual artifacts. This brings us to the level of analysis construction. For Potter and Wetherell (1987), the production of scientific discourse, such as texts on organizational behavior, is as functional and constructive in its character as other, less sacrosanct types of discourse, such as a conversation. Contrary to popular opinion, research texts are not, and cannot be, objective or clinical accounts of the facts. Rather, they engage in the persuasive construction of facts through the powerful voice of the clinically objective researcher (Van Maanen, 1995; Watson, 1994). The impression sought and, usually, created, is that competent mastery of the rules of science—in combination with the use of a disciplined talent for innovative, analytical thinking—produces an impartial account. Often, this is made possible through the skillful marginalization of the prestructured understandings of the researcher; his or her class, gender, and nationality; and his or her paradigmatic, theoretical, and political preferences and biases, which, inevitably, all inform the account. All this is framed within the rhetorical devices and stylistic conventions of scientific writing (see Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1999).

At the level of fieldwork, Potter and Wetherell's (1987) version of discourse analysis shows, for example, the potential of remaining sensitive to the productive, constructive, and contextual character of language use and also provides some clues on how to deal with this in a systematic fashion. At the level of analysis construction, discourse analysis presents a framework that may be considered instructive in how to produce viable "truth-effects" (Jeffcutt, 1993). However, discourse analysis does tend to overemphasize the importance of the inconsistency, variation, and context dependency of speech acts. One might even say that Potter and Wetherell (1987) are guilty of the sins they ascribe to other approaches, namely, selective interpretation, because they tend to prefer interpretations that show the inconsistent, variant, and contextual qualities of language use. As a counterweight to the comparatively naive, realist approaches, this may be justified.

But, it is also important to draw attention to the relative capacity of language to (equivocally) convey insights, experiences, and factual information, as well as the pragmatic value of emphasizing its capacity to clarify phenomena. Criticism of the naive view of representation does not imply a destructive, categorical rejection of the communicative powers of language. As Rorty (1992), in a critique of Lyotard (1984), put it, "For language no more has a nature than humanity does; both have only a history. There is as much unity or transparency of language as there is willingness to converse rather than fight" (p. 66).

Hence, we want to emphasize the partial ability of language to convey something beyond itself and to stress the variation in the relative consistency and value of utterances as clues to phenomena beyond themselves. Variations in interview responses,

for example, do not necessarily mean that they do not point at something outside the contexts of the speech acts. Rather than illustrating the unreliable nature of accounts, they may indicate an ambiguous and inconsistent organizational reality; a varied, even contradictory, set of beliefs or values informing respondent perceptions; or merely the nuanced complexity of the issues in question.

In research practice, this means remaining reflective and skeptical, but not categorical, about the discursive level in research. In this respect, it is important to

1. carefully think through to what extent an account may be treated as an indication of phenomena such as behaviors, relations, events, ideas, values, emotions, and intentions;
2. indicate why there are good reasons to treat the account in this way; and
3. be explicit about the speculative element involved.

The Study of Discourse and the Absence of Meaning

The challenge is to treat language and the use of language seriously but without necessarily constraining oneself to the strict focus of discursivism. The level of talk constitutes an important area of research, but any study remains incomplete without the incorporation and consideration of the level of meaning. In one sense, the level of meaning is always present in any attempt to make sense of what people are doing or saying, because we cannot see something without seeing it as something (Asplund, 1970; Geertz, 1973). Seeing people engaged in verbal exchange as talking to each other is in itself an interpretation, and this remains true even if one chooses to see them as carrying out a particular practice. In this sense, the level of meaning is not absent in discursivist research. It is only underinvestigated.

The meanings produced by the researcher to make sense of the phenomena under investigation are but one aspect of the level of meaning. In the context of empirical research, the meanings produced by the people in the field are perhaps of even greater significance. To consider the level of meaning implies an interest in what people mean by the expressions they use. It also implies an interest in what meaning they ascribe to the practices they, and others, deploy.

Taking the level of meaning seriously includes efforts to identify what criteria the "natives" are using in deciding what stands for consistent and inconsistent vocabulary use. And, in terms of the practices employed by the "natives," any serious interest in the level of meaning includes attempts to figure out how they make sense of what they are doing, or at least an effort to establish to what extent accounts make sense to "natives" and what sense there is.

The difference between taking the level of meaning seriously or taking it for granted has been described by Geertz (1973)—following Gilbert Ryle—as either making thick or thin descriptions. The difference is nicely captured in the example used by Geertz in making his point—the difference between a twitch and wink. Described thinly, there is no difference between a twitch and a wink. As phenomena, both consist of a rapid contraction of the eyelid.

> Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and

indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company. As Ryle points out, the winker has done two things, contracted the eyelid and winked, while the twitcher has done only one, contracted his eyelid. Contracting your eyelid on purpose when there exists a public code in which doing so counts as a conspirational signal is winking. That's all there is to it: a speck of behavior, a fleck of culture and—voilá—a gesture. (p. 6)

In our minds, discourse analysis and related orientations demonstrate a certain thinness, in the sense elaborated above. Studies of "native" discourses in organizational settings may reveal the ways in which people use language to produce certain effects. But, as long as one restricts oneself to the level of talk, those who are actually talking become curiously fugitive. It is as if an utterance produces other utterances through people, thus inverting the conventional understanding of things: Language becomes the agent, and people become the medium. This is not necessarily a bad understanding of the relation between people and language, as poststructuralist writings argue (Weedon, 1987). It still is a relatively fresh one. However, thus far, it remains a thinner way because, for example, it cannot account for the difference between a twitch and a wink: Words are merely the means to produce different kinds of discourse. The practical meaning and, thus, effects become lost. On all other kinds of possible effects, those dedicated to the level of talk must remain silent.

Thus, a strict focus on language use as a methodological approach has some limitations. In particular, such research seems to have a narrow research agenda and tends to avoid questions of meaning. This makes the understanding of discourses and conversations problematic. At the same time, discourse analysis has identified and highlighted the very considerable difficulties in interpreting meanings in interviews or in "naturally occurring settings." Problems in accessing these meanings contributed to Silverman's route from social phenomenology (Silverman, 1970) to conversational analysis (Silverman, 1993, 1997). How can we cope with this dilemma, so crucial to present and forthcoming social research? In other words, how can meaning be seriously considered and a broader research agenda pursued and at the same time naive romanticism be avoided while ensuring that a sophisticated methodological awareness of language guides research? In the next section, we suggest how the discursive pragmatist approach addresses this trade-off in a productive way.

METHODOLOGICAL GUIDELINES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH INFORMED BY THE LINGUISTIC TURN

Instead of treating the problem of representation as an absolute, categorically assuming that we cannot represent anything whatsoever (except, perhaps, texts), we may see the problem of representation as relative and contingent. The statement that this text was originally written with some sort of writing device (in our case, Macintosh word processors) is probably acceptable by most people irrespective of cultural or theoretical background. This is also probably true for those rejecting a correspondence view of language. The representational capacity in language may always be

a problematic issue, but the significance of this problem may vary, depending on the issues at hand. Language may not be capable of representing reality in toto, but it indeed seems capable of providing the means to communicate instructively in and on various realities.

A move toward a focus on micro events and actions may reduce the burdens put on language carrying meanings that say something empirically relevant about what may go on in a specific setting "out there." For example, to measure how the degree of charisma of managers correlates with degrees of satisfaction, motivation, or performances of subordinates may well be to expect far too much in terms of what language can do. It might also overstate what knowing subjects actually can accomplish when asked to summarize their presumed knowledge about themselves or their managers by putting an X in a small box on a piece of paper labeled questionnaire (or even in a "depth interview") (Alvesson, 1996b). To describe the language use in a specific interaction between two persons in some detail is certainly not unproblematic but may still be a more rigorous enterprise than any attempt to study people's beliefs about the world or their actions. A relatively high degree of empirical accuracy may be said to characterize this sort of research.

Studying Talk Versus Using Talk as an Indicator

Apart from the level of talk, as noted above, studying organizational activities also generally includes the level of practice and the level of meaning. Empirically speaking, these three basic levels of research focus—practice, meaning, and talk—intersect, interact, and intermesh with each other in various degrees and fashions. Utterances, for example, carry various meanings and may have practical implications, that is, convert into action on the level of practice. Talk may even be the cornerstone of practice, as with teaching, leading, or counseling. However, from a methodological point of view, there are very good reasons to keep the levels analytically distinct and to regard any actual relationship between the levels as an open question. This does not mean that utterances have no meaning or that meanings have no practical significance. On the contrary. It means that we, as researchers, have no foolproof way of knowing what meaning certain forms of talk take on. We cannot know for sure what relevance utterances on practices have in relation to actually performed practices. And we cannot exhaustively grasp the various meanings ascribed to practices by those who perform them, those who design them, and those who order their execution—to mention but a few possible combinations.

For example, utterances made in an interview regarding organizational practices may reflect some aspects of actual practices. But, they may also reflect morally binding conventions on how organizational members speak on these matters—how one as a competent member ought to describe actual practices (Silverman, 1985). They may reflect some of the interpretive repertoires that are available to organizational members on the matter and/or in the situation rather than describe the practice per se or express a privileged meaning (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Or, for that matter, they may provide all of this: Their utterances may reflect actual practices, cultural information, and the discursive strategies available.

The hard thing, of course, is to distinguish to what extent utterances made in interviews do all or any of these things. To treat utterances as indicators of how people speak on specific matters, at least in certain social situations, seems to be least problematic. In this case, one does not have to leave the level of talk and speculate whether what is said is significant beyond revealing discursive moves deployed on the matter. Still, there are problems deciding on the interpretation of statements. Because meaning rarely is self-evident, what informants mean and how they interpret specific statements may need clarification. Talk in interviews may differ from language use in other settings. When one is studying discourse or the use of specific vocabularies, it sometimes makes sense to make inquiries about the salience or frequency of these. It may be economical (although not unproblematic) to get informants' evaluations instead of tape-recording several hundred hours of talk. Some interviewing may, therefore, be used to supplement studies of language use.

To view utterances as providers of cultural information becomes a more daring endeavor. This involves the level of meaning and, thus, some guesswork on how meaning is produced, how interpretations are made, and on what counts as significant among those under study. As previously stated, the idea that utterances stand in any definitive relationship to ideas, values, beliefs, motives, or other cultural-level phenomena is, on the whole, questionable. If accounts reflect moral standards for expressing oneself in a cultural context, the accounts say something about culture, but more so on the level of the espoused than the meanings and symbolism nonconsciously believed in and acted upon. Of course, one option is to view accounts as very local cultural material: They may thus be treated as indications of situation-specific meanings, ideas, and values. Whether these are congruent with other local cultural materials, manifested in actions, in talk in other contexts, and/or in cultural artifacts is an open question, difficult but possible to investigate.

Finally, to view utterances as reflecting actual practices is even more daring, at least if we consider nontrivial phenomena. To see accounts as reflecting organizational phenomena that are "out there," such as corporate strategies or structures, implies two assumptions. First, that such accounts reflect people's genuine beliefs and knowledge about a specific phenomena and, second, that these beliefs and knowledge are not basically cultural, or reflect personal meanings and consciousness, but stand in an accurate relationship to facts about the practices (actions, events, situations, processes, structures, and relations) "out there." This includes guesswork and assumptions on all three levels: What does an account say, that is, what is the meaning of a seldom crystal-clear statement? Does what the speaker seems to say reflect what she or he thinks or believes? Does what she or he may think or believe reflect how it is? One cannot simply assume a high degree of robustness of all the elements involved. It must be demonstrated or at least made plausible. As the illustrations provided earlier indicate, this is difficult to accomplish on most issues studied by organizational scholars.

Nevertheless, it is not impossible. Arguably, there is work available that demonstrates the fruitfulness of being sensitive to the framing power of context and language. Such work includes, for example, studies of leadership in social, interactive situations rather than as an abstract behavioral style (Knights & Willmott, 1992); power as it is expressed in action in which linguistic behavior is central (Alvesson, 1996a); structure

as a historical accomplishment in local settings rather than structure as an eternal property of formal organization (Barley, 1986, 1990); the vocabulary of motives rather than motivation (Mills, 1940); talk as an administrative device rather than as a carrier of abstract principles of administration (Gronn, 1983); identity work in narrations rather than identity as an essence (Alvesson, 1994); and symbols as agents of change and stability rather than as expressions of corporate culture (Gioia et al., 1994).

CONCLUSION

The attack on dominant and conventional assumptions regarding the relations between language and social reality has far-reaching but poorly acknowledged implications for empirical research in organizational analysis. Despite the various linguistic turns, the great majority of empirical studies treat language in a simplistic, uncritical, and misleading way. Efforts to produce and check reliable measures rarely involve any deeper reflections on the nature of language. Literature on method often does not address language and implicitly treats it as a transparent medium for the transport of meaning. This article has identified five responses that accommodate the critique given by proponents of postmodernism, discourse analysis, and other language-sensitive orientations: grounded fictionalism, metaphor-driven data construction, literary data construction, discursivism, and discursive pragmatism.

Grounded fictionalism simply acknowledges the impossibilities of language to mirror social phenomena (and, indeed, anything outside language itself). This means that descriptions, predictions, reliability, and validity become problematic. Research work may still be empirical in the sense of using insights gained from talk with people or observations and produce ideas or theories that are relevant for practitioners, but any formal inquiry or claims of grounding are abandoned as an ideal, indeed, as a possibility. Given the observation that those organizational theories that are viewed as most interesting seldom have received much empirical support (Astley, 1985), this line may be celebrated to the extent that it liberates theory development from the straightjacket of verification.

The two versions of data construction recognize the impossibility of carrying out empirical studies according to traditional methodological ideals. If language cannot mirror reality, grounding appears to be a rather shaky enterprise. Furthermore, the problems and potentialities of language and language use mingle with other complications—the significance of prestructured understandings, the politics of the research process, the infinite number of possibilities, and rules for the production of research texts. Data-constructionist research stresses complications other than strictly language-oriented aspects, for example, cognitive input, selectivity, and creativity in putting a research text together. However, this also permits a freer attitude.

Empirical material is seen as a significant basis for any constructivist study but is subordinate to the cognitive input brought in or textual output brought out by the researcher as a language user. From the metaphor-driven perspective, the central focus is on the metaphorically structured and guided understandings of the subject matter. This generates different constructions of the data, based on cognitive input and the

interpretive processing of the material. From the literary perspective, the textual strategies for accomplishing a persuasive, interesting research text and the narrating and fictionalization of the material encountered in empirical work take precedence over what data tell. Still, it is vital to consider carefully and critically how the empirical material can be used. The two data-constructionist versions of research maintain the ideal or claim of having some empirical grounding.

Discursivism involves a specific and detailed focus on language and, in particular, language use. Accounts provided by informants in situations set up by researchers are treated as empirical situations to be studied as such, not as sources of speculation on what may go on in the minds of people or in situations other than those in which the accounts have been produced. Methodologically, this approach demands rigorous analytic techniques and adopts more conventional criteria of reliability and validity.

In discursive pragmatist research, this constraint is less strict. There is more room for speculation about what discursive material may indicate beyond the informants' use of discursive repertoires, that is, meanings and effects contingent on language use. Observed linguistic interaction in a manager-subordinate interaction may, for example, help one to draw some conclusions about leadership patterns. A wide spectrum of organizational phenomena may be reconstructed to narrow the gap between a specific area of interest and what is possible to say about it, given an appreciation of the nature and dynamics of language use.

Although the five versions lead to rather different methodological implications, they may be seen as alternatives that are fully compatible with and emerge from the same basic premises: the nature of language as context dependent, metaphorical, active, built upon repressed meanings, and capable of constituting "other" phenomena. They are all consistent with an understanding of language users as socially situated, discursively constituted, sensitive, and responsive to dominant cultural norms, social rules, and available scripts for talk, oriented toward the effects of language use. They do not presuppose informants as being abstract, disengaged tellers of truths in their questionnaire responses or romantic revealers of genuine experiences in interviews. We believe that methodology calls for some degree of pragmatism. Different research interests and problems call for different methodological responses. Taking language seriously does, however, limit what we can accomplish in terms of making valid empirical claims, testing hypotheses, building theory on data, or verifying theory with empirical findings. We think it is important to make the analytical separation of the levels of text, meaning, and practice. It is argued that although these levels generally are simultaneously activated in natural settings, it is a fallacy—all too often made in organizational analysis—to unreflectively use empirical evidence stemming from the level of language use to draw conclusions regarding aspects concerning other levels.

Clearly, broad and powerful trends in social philosophy and social science call for a more perceptive stance toward current methodological dogma (Alvesson & Deetz, 1999; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Silverman, 1993, 1997). So far, these trends have had relatively little impact on actual research practices. Published research often makes bold statements based on interview or questionnaire statements. The time has come for radical rethinking. In reconsidering the way language

works and operates, new research agendas emerge. The same is true for research virtues: Such virtues may include the production of new ideas and insights, aesthetically engaging texts, useful solutions on practical problems, and political awareness. Last but not least, they may also include the employment of fieldwork practices that capture the delicacies of language use in organizational settings and thereby better our knowledge of organizational realities.

NOTES

1. Discourse is a concept used in a variety of different ways (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998). Discourse analysis is a specific direction focusing on the detailed study of language use in a social context (Potter, 1997; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

2. There is some common ground between postmodernism and discourse analysis. The former to some extent is a source of philosophical inspiration for the latter. However, the relationship is not very tight, as discourse analysis draws on a wider spectrum of philosophical and theoretical inspiration and is a rigorous empirical research program that differs heavily from the thrust of most versions of postmodernism.

3. The linguistic turn also has made its mark on contemporary theorizing on societal issues. For example, in Foucault's extremely influential conception of power, discourses—ways of reasoning drawing upon and producing the constitutive labeling and classification of the social world—are seen as being crucial as a way, if not the way, to exercise power. Discourses arrange and normalize the social world in particular ways, thus constituting specific forms of subjectivity in which human subjects are managed and given a certain form (Foucault, 1976, 1980). Within critical theory, Habermas has developed a communicative theory, which, although recognizing the formative capacity of language, radically differs from the Foucauldian conception of language. From Habermas's point of view, the formative capacity in language enables a critical exploration of problematic claims of validity. Through such exploration, well-grounded standpoints emerge in dialogue, based on the persuasive powers of good arguments (Habermas, 1984). Whereas Foucault has moved power from resources and coercion to discourse and the forming of subjectivity, Habermas has changed the focus of critical theory from ideology and consciousness to language and communication. For applications of a communicative turn in organizational and planning theory, see Forester (1992, 1993).

4. The concept "empirical" is difficult. It is used here to indicate some aspects of the reality (practices, ideas, language use) of one or a group of persons, as indicated by research practices (interviews, observations, text analysis).

5. The term *deconstruction*, of course, is used in a variety of ways. Morrow (1994) notes that it is increasingly employed rather loosely to refer to any kind of rhetorical analysis critically illuminating naive, realistic, and unreflexive conceptions of representation (p. 246). Originally, in Derrida's work, it stands for an analysis that shows how a discourse undermines the philosophy it asserts or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying the rhetorical operations behind the argument or key concept.

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