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4. On Words and Work

Anni Borzeix

The question I would like to address is: why should sociology of work be concerned, today, with words, language, interaction, communication whereas, traditionally, our attention was focussed on such things as the division of labour, work conditions, industrial relations, strike's and labour movements, productive models, exploitation, domination, alienation etc ...?

The concern is not a heavy trend, many sociologists in the field do not share it. Roughly, even if empirical research is developing fast, under 20 articles have been published in the last 5 years on the subject in the French academic review, *Sociologie du Travail*. It is more of an emergent, relatively recent and basically cross disciplinary domain I will be referring to. So, why bother with words when work is under observation?

1. First way to answer: because there is an increasing interest for language in many human sciences. In analytical philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and of course, in different branches of sociology. Combined with a renewed attention given to action theory this has broadened our scope, forcing us out of our traditional boundaries. Not only because language and subjectivity are firmly linked – »is ego one who says ego« and »it is in and by language that man makes a subject of himself«, in Benvenist's terms (Benvenist 1974). But because things are often »done with words«, as Pragmatics puts it (Austin 1970): actions can actually be accomplished (performed) with or within words. This applies to work just as it does to any other type of »social« action (Weber 1965). On a more methodological level, language also gives access to the meaning actions have for the actors themselves.
2. Another way to answer the question is to say: because work activities and productive organizations have changed. This is a most obvious reason I won't go much into. Two points only:

New technologies have changed the balance between direct, physical, material manipulations (of tools, objects, materials) in favour of symbolic manipulations. All sorts of computerized forms of production and communicative technologies (from bureautics to sophisticated group-ware) have a shared effect: they de-materialise productive activities, increasing signs and symbol usage. Language, words, texts, graphs, charts, screens are some of the symbolic resources this »semiotic turn«, in production, shed into light. They are new empirical objects to understand and analyse if one is concerned with what work is about or consists of today.

New forms of productive organization in firms have also emerged in recent years. Everyone has heard of autonomous work groups, team work, quality circles, electronic conferences, project management, concurrent engineering, bench marking etc. ... What can be noted, here, is a shift from a roughly speaking tayloristic, individualistic, pyramidal model in firms, toward a more horizontal, cooperative model where different combinations of two radically different principles can be found: coordination and communication. They are meant to produce transversality, reactivity and integration instead of separation, isolation and specialisation (Zarifian 1996). Acting together seems to have become a new organizational

»must», some thing like a new normative prescription. This means exploring these collaborative or communicative situations and competencies. To see what they are made of and meant for. What their efficiency comes from and by what miracle words, dialogue, interaction, meetings and debate have suddenly become new resources for productivity, performance and competitiveness.

3. A third way to answer is to say because we have changed. Our insight on work and work situations, our theoretical references, our questions, the methodological devices and tools used to collect and analyse data have evolved. Three examples:

The first one concerns our paradigmas. In a more weberian, constructivist, comprehensive tradition, rather than the demonstrative, durkheimian one, long dominant in French sociology, emphasis is put on things like meaning, interpretation, intentionality (»sens visé«). Social actors in general, people at work in particular, are not »cultural idiots« (Garfinkel 1967): what they do and say (their »ethno-methods«) are the data to be examined. Not because words are transparent but because social relations are built on them and social actions, with them. Even the most dequalified, apparently simple, routineous tasks, if looked into this way, become complexe actions, imply thinking, reasoning, anticipating, cooperating. If language is loaded with action, it's »endogenous« (Pharo 1985) meaning, for the subject, is, as a consequence, partly accessible to observation because of its accountability. Words as work, words on work, words in work have therefor become research matters: not as formal, decontextualized linguistic structures but as verbal accomplishments, interwoven in situated, often collective, social actions.

The second example is more methodological. A recent line of research in sociology has developed around a micro-analytical approach (interactionnal and conversational analysis, for example) rather than our macro-structuralistic-systemic tradition, long prevalent, namely in it's Marxist version, in sociology of work. Situation and context have become major issues. Work is looked upon as a »situated activity« (Suchman 1987) to be examined as a local accomplishment, not because exploitation, domination, alienation or protest no longer exist. But because, as critical analysts in such a conception, we can eventually explore, in a more operational way, it's complexity.

Situations are no longer »neglected« (Goffman 1964). What they are made of, where they start, where they end, who the participants are, are major debates. What has changed could also be called a »descriptive« turn (Quére 1992) and a change in scale. An effort is made to ground results on more rigourous forms of data collecting, including tape recording and video. Like many others engaged in a reseach field often called »work place studies« (Knoblauch 1996), our aim is to build up critical knowledge on complexe interaction in natural work settings in their institutional context. Critical, because »real«-work activities are always very far from prescribed tasks, as many ergonomists have shown. Another aim is to produce substantial elements of empirical »proof« on what we can advance. Methodological choices and epistemological considerations are, in this respect, closely linked.

My third example is on objets. Take collective action (a largely used notion in French sociology of work) and coordination (a much broader concept discussed in many other disciplines including economics, analytical philosophy, artificial intelligence, logic's, cognitive sciences, anthropology, psychology, game theory ...). Collective action was always

one of our main concerns. It was basically reserved for all forms of protest, formal and informal mobilisation *against* work conditions and work organisation. Recently, another acceptance has occurred: how is acting together for productive ends, collectively managed? What is cooperation made of, how is coordination among human beings at work accomplished? Such questions are of course partly raised because of the transformations in the contents and the design of work activities mentioned above. Control, regulation, maintenance and coping with incidents are major tasks today in product and service industries. They almost always mean shared, or distributed or plural forms of initiative and reasoning. Problem solving requires decision making and responsibility and, at least, tacit forms of co-operation and a good deal of communication. As work sociologists, our job is to examine how language, context and action mutually determine or co-produce each other. This perspective underscores (1) the dynamics, the sequential nature of the processes considered (2) the variety of semiotics (oral communication, face to face or mediated by phone or radio, written and preformatted texts, computerised data, graphs and lists ...) engaged in complex work activities and (3) their collective or plural nature.

An interesting point, here, is the objective convergence between such outer-world transformations in work and firms and some of the theoretical references or concepts to be found, for example in:

- natural logic's and reasoning: Grice's conversational maxims;
- interactional sociology: Goffman's frames of experience, channels of engagement and forms of participation in interaction;
- ethnography of communication: Gumperz's contextualisation cues, his concern for prosody in interpretation procedures;
- ethnomethodology: Garfinkel's accountability, where accounting for the co-ordinated and practical character of social action as a basis for social order is the analysts main job;
- cognitive sciences with concepts such as distributed cognition or collective intelligence.

Looking into co-ordination, collaboration, co-operation at work as empirical or objects means taking language seriously. Words are necessary to inform but what does information really cover? Words are used to explain, to justify, to teach, to reformulate, to anticipate. They can be used to refuse, to oppose and, at the same time, to produce common references, to negotiate, to plan, to decide, to solve problems, to share knowledge. The difficulty for us, as analysts, is to connect words *in use* to actions *being accomplished*.

4. A fourth line of answer, I will only briefly mention, has to do with changes in the way linguists – some of them at least – treat language. Linguistics, also, has changed. Emphasis has shifted from an exclusive focus on internal, formal linguistic structures, toward discourse and verbal interaction in social context. Reflexivity and indexicality bring forth new ways to consider old questions: how can context be specified? How is meaning produced? How do interpretations procedures actually work? The simplistic coding/decoding model built on a term-to-term relation between meaning and meant is no longer accepted. How are inferences made? How is mutual understanding achieved? Sperber and Wilson (1989), J. Gumperz (1982) are good examples of this new attention given to interpretation and comprehension.

To sum up what has just been said.: (1) sociology has changed, (2) so has linguistics, (3) work has too, and (4) we, (some of us) are no longer entirely satisfied with the paradigms, methods and concepts we have been using: four reasons to get interested in language. Not as linguists do, even if their analytical tools can be borrowed, transferred, adapted, transplanted, but in language as a *social practice*, not as a formal structure.

My second point is a very schematic overview of research going on in a group called »Language and Work«. Who are »we«?

A federative, pluridisciplinary network born ten years ago (recognized as such by the French CNRS). Linguists, sociologists, ergonomists, anthropologists, psychologists, economists, belonging to different research units and universities, involved in research programs, seminars, conferences, teaching, editing. (Cahiers »Langage et travail«). A network whose loose ties and meager resources have managed, over time, to maintain tight interpersonal and intellectual links.

Our empirical domain is language use – including oral, written and other forms of non verbal (gestural, prosody) communication – in work activities, work settings, work situations, work organizations. As to our theoretical environment, the labels we refer to ourselves range from pragmatics and sociolinguistics, discourse and conversation analysis, ethnography of communication, to interactional and constructive sociology, ethnomethodology, cognitive anthropology and organizational studies (Boutet, 1995).

A few basic ideas, principles or methodological premises we share are: (1) work as a situated activity, a practical accomplishment; (2) meaning as an interactive co-constructive process; (3) cognition as a social, not only mental, phenomena; (4) language as a multidimensional (instrumental, cognitive, collective and emotive) object to be observed in context; (5) communicative situations to be analysed in complex organisational settings, in relation to ongoing actions; (6) data to be collected in natural »real-world« settings this involving in depth ethnographic observation.

As a brief illustration of some of the empirical field work undertaken in recent research projects (*Connexions*, 1995), four examples from different types of institutional environment and economic sectors: (a) *Hospitals*: on communication and co-ordination procedures among personal and, particularly, in information transfer situations between shifts and services. (b) *Public transportation* (trains and underground): on distributed cognition and collective decisions in traffic control and communication channels. (c) *Nuclear plants*: in control rooms, on verbal and non verbal communication between human actors, artefacts and written prescriptions seen as an organisational »agency«. (d) *Service encounters*: in different public services between clients and agents where cognitive, relational and social ingredients of communication are deeply interwoven to co-produce service quality and efficiency.

Research is often implemented in relation to social »demands« or problems, formulated in complex organisations who often co-finance the projects and therefore expect operational results or advice.

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5. Die Produktion des Produzenten – Kommunikationsarbeit im Management

Achim Brosziewski

I.

Der Vorschlag, management- und betriebssoziologische Untersuchungen bei Problemen der Interaktion und Kommunikation anzusetzen, ist keineswegs neu. Zum einen war er in der Theorie kommunikativen Handelns angelegt (Habermas 1981, kritisch Giddens 1982, Offe 1983), zum anderen war er Programm einer vom Symbolischen Interaktionismus angeregten Organisationsforschung. Folgt man dieser Forschungsrichtung, dann lassen sich organisierte Arbeitskontexte als »negotiated order« (Fine 1981) und die Tätigkeit des Managements als »symbolic action« (Pfeffer 1981) beschreiben. Allerdings waren diese Forschungsimpulse und -erträge mit einer scharfen und bis heute anhaltenden Abspaltung von der traditionellen Organisations-, Betriebs- und Industriesociologie verbunden. Seither hat man es in der Unternehmenssoziologie mit einer gedoppelten Realität zu tun: Einmal mit einer »harten« und ein andermal mit einer »weichen« Realität, oft verbunden mit Unterscheidungen zwischen einer »ökonomischen Rationalität« und der »Kultur« von Unternehmen.

Man kann – so die hier vorzustellende Annahme – diesem Disput und den traditionell rezeptierten Dichotomien von »ökonomisch« und »sozial« bzw. »kulturell« entgehen, wenn man es als einen Teil der *kommunikativ* (also: sozial) zu bewältigenden *Arbeit* des Managements auffaßt, *ökonomische Realitäten beziehungsweise Rationalitäten* in die Organisation und den betrieblichen Ablauf von Arbeit *einzuführen* und deren Relevanzen laufend zu