What's cooking in organizational discourse studies? A response to Alvesson and Kärreman

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Abstract

While Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000) 'Varieties of Discourse' essay was an important and oft-cited marker in the field of organizational discourse studies, I argue in this response that their rather gloomy, even curmudgeonly, updated reading of the field is not only misplaced but also rooted in their own reductionist conception of discourse – a charge that they themselves level against contemporary organizational discourse research. As a communication scholar who makes his interdisciplinary home in the area of organizational communication/organization studies, I argue that much of Alvesson and Kärreman's critique has its origin in a rather anemic, even wrongheaded, reading of the 'linguistic turn' – a reading that limits the generative and analytic possibilities of post-linguistic turn organizational discourse studies.

Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000) original 'Varieties of Discourse' essay is an important and much-cited effort to navigate the increasingly complex terrain of organizational discourse studies. It argued that the term 'discourse' had become so widely deployed and variously defined that it had lost much of its analytic power and theoretical rigor, thus undermining its heuristic value in understanding organizing processes. The original essay therefore addressed both conceptual and analytical issues in an effort to provide a metatheoretical framework – à la Burrell and Morgan (1979) – through which various

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approaches to the discourse-organization relationship might be compared and assessed, thus bringing greater rigor to empirical work.

While the original essay was mostly descriptive and administrative in its efforts to create useful distinctions among a variety of claims regarding the discourse-organization relationship, 'Varieties of Discourse 2.0' is more polemical and provocative in tone and substance. Indeed, one might even argue that Alvesson and Kärreman flirt with an 'anti-discursive' mien in their efforts to roll back what they see as some of the more grandiose claims of organizational discourse studies.

In this response I suggest that Alvesson and Kärreman's rather gloomy, even curmudgeonly, reading of the current state of organizational discourse studies is not only misplaced but also rooted in their own reductionist conception of discourse – a charge that they themselves level against contemporary organizational discourse research. As a communication scholar who makes his interdisciplinary home in the area of organizational communication/ organization studies, I want to argue that much of Alvesson and Kärreman's critique of the current state of organizational discourse studies has its origin in a rather anemic, even wrongheaded, reading of the 'linguistic turn' – a reading that limits the generative and analytic possibilities of post-linguistic turn organizational discourse studies.

Restating the (not so) obvious

> The central 'turn' issues of how different worlds emerge, the power relations in this emergence, and the mechanisms of production, get lost . . . The hope of the linguistic turn to replace consciousness with language as the fundamental constitutive description falls to the re-psychologicalization of experience. (Deetz, 2003: 425)

Because Alvesson and Kärreman invoke the linguistic turn and its constitutive role in the emergence of organizational discourse studies (and, of course, many other research agendas in numerous disciplines) let me discuss briefly that ubiquitous term, indicating both what it is, and what it isn't.

First, to say that the linguistic turn is primarily about the shift to a focus on language, talk, texts, discourse, or communication (or whatever term applies) is to adopt a highly superficial – even incorrect – conception of the term and the set of principles that underlie it. The 'linguistic turn' is better understood as shorthand for a whole continental philosophical tradition that attempts to transcend the subject-object dualism that undergirds much of modernist knowledge production, and that has its origins in a psychological conception of experience of a world that exists independently from this experience (Deetz, 2003; Mumby, 1997).

The so-called 'crisis of representation' (Jameson, 1984) that the linguistic turn generated was an effort to topple an autonomous, coherent, fully-formed consciousness from its perch at the top of the tree of knowledge and put in its place a much more indeterminate notion of knowledge and meaning rooted in language.

This reframing aimed to turn discussions of knowledge claims away from competing subjective and objective conceptions of the world (humanism versus traditional social science, for example), and toward recognition of the various implications and consequences of taking up one knowledge-constituting discourse over another. As Deetz (1996) has convincingly shown, within organization studies Burrell and Morgan's

sociological reading of the 'paradigm wars' reified the first conception of competing knowledge claims, thus preserving the subject-object dichotomy that generations of philosophical thought have sought to overcome. One of the problems with this reification was that it left the integrity and assumptions of the competing claims untouched and, unfortunately for much interpretive, discourse-oriented work, enclosed it in its own relatively self-contained academic enclave.

Within the tradition of the linguistic turn, then, the central question is not how to differentiate and therefore adjudicate between subjective (discursive) and objective (material) conceptions and explanations of human behavior and the world 'in' which it operates. The issue, rather, is how we can explore, in a generative manner and through various conceptual and analytic resources, the linguistic character of all experience (and all knowledge claims!), and the ways that experiences and objects are constituted in dialectical relationship to one another.

However, the reproduction of the subject-object dualism in organization studies (including more humanistic, text- and talk-based approaches) has frequently led to studies that examine text, talk, and meaning rather than using a discourse perspective to examine (and problematize) the ways in which the subject-world relationship is produced. Thus, to speak of meaning and knowledge as subjective and 'in the heads of individuals' is every bit as problematic as maintaining that the world is 'out there' waiting to be revealed – both positions are rooted in a radical bifurcation of subject and object, word and world.

From a critical perspective the linguistic turn has highlighted the ways in which power and discourse are inextricably and constitutively linked in the construction of social realities. More specifically, critical research has enabled us to explore how identities, meanings, institutions and objects become sedimented and naturalized with their original formative conditions hidden from everyday experience (Deetz, 1992). In this sense, the linguistic turn tradition is intrinsically political to the degree that it recovers and examines the contested character of constitutive processes. By examining the ways that particular identities, meanings, institutions, and objects are privileged over other potential formations, it opens up possibilities for rethinking and re-imagining organizing processes and practices.

In sum, the linguistic turn is not simply about the privileging of language or discourse in understanding human behavior (though it is partly that). More fundamentally, it involves a reconfiguration of how we understand and explore our mediated relationship to the world and each other. By recognizing the linguistic character of all experience we can move beyond subjective or objective, discursive versus realist conceptions of human behavior to examine the intersubjective character of social reality – a reality in which both the discursive and material are inextricably entwined, but are by no means isomorphic or reducible to each other.

With this preamble as context for my argument, let me now move to addressing directly Alvesson and Kärreman's critical engagement with organizational discourse studies. I want to suggest that their misappropriation of the linguistic turn tradition actually leads to a reproduction of the subject-object dichotomy in their reading of organizational discourse studies, which in turn results in the sneaking in via the back door of a transmission model of communication. Moreover, I argue that their essay privileges a rather cognitive,

psychological (pre-linguistic turn) model of the individual that positions social actors as fully-formed, autonomous dispensers of discourse; again, this is an inevitable consequence of their reproduction of the subject-object dichotomy in their conception of the linguistic turn.

Denuding discourse

> When statements about an object or topic are made from within a certain discourse, that discourse makes it possible to construct that object in a particular way. It also limits the other ways in which that object can be thought about and acted upon. (Du Gay, 2000: 67)

> So much for this thing called organizational discourse: it exists only insofar as practices are carried out in its name that establish (or challenge) its authority within the social and cultural norms of the larger academic community. (Hardy et al., 2005: 801)

Alvesson and Kärreman's reading of the current state of organizational discourse studies represents both progressive and regressive moves in its effort to develop generative conceptions of the discourse-organization relationship.

On the one hand, I have sympathies with their concerns about the ways in which discourse studies have taken up the powerful notion that language/discourse 'constitutes' organizational reality. Of course, there are many ways to characterize this idea (for an excellent overview of many of the relevant issues, see Ashcraft et al., 2009). However, in some ways it has become a rather taken-for-granted assertion that stands in for the hard work of investigating the dynamics of the discourse-organization relationship. Indeed, one might argue that discourse-based approaches to organizing are in danger of constructing a new positivism (a 'text positivism,' to use Richard Rorty's felicitous term) in which the idea that 'discourse constitutes organization' is ontologized and reified rather than problematized and investigated in order to unpack its complexities.

For example, interview-based discourse studies are often guilty of taking the claims of those interviewed and transforming them into empirical evidence about the socially constructed reality of organizational life. These studies sometimes overreach their claims about what remarks made in an interview can tell us about a broader organizational reality. Such interview studies provide useful insight into how organization members *construct their identities and make sense* of organizational realities (either individually or collectively), but it is difficult to then take a conceptual leap to making larger claims about the organizing processes being studied except in the context of more encompassing ethnographic methods.

The 'text positivism' of discourse studies, then, can result in a functionalist reading of 'discourse as constitutive,' whereby the analytic process is short-circuited and a unitary relationship between discourse and 'reality as constructed' is articulated. What these readings often elide are the complexities and contradictions of the sense-making process – they often assume a degree of self-awareness on the part of organization members that belies the ways they are caught up in the very discourses that they appropriate to position themselves organizationally. Good discourse studies problematize constitutive processes by unpacking the complexities of (often contradictory and indeterminate) meanings that provide the substance of organizational life.

On the other hand, Alvesson and Kärreman base their criticisms of the current state of organizational discourse studies in their own set of questionable assumptions about the directions that the field has taken and where it should be heading. In brief, Alvesson and Kärreman make three broad critiques of organizational discourse studies, and then make three parallel suggestions for addressing these issues.

First, they suggest that the relationship between 'Big D' and 'little d' D/discourses is problematic as taken up by organizational discourse researchers. They argue that there is too much continuity between the two analytic frames such that, for example, studies that focus on Discourse analysis (e.g. Foucauldian studies) are too eager to grant these Grand Discourses the power to construct unproblematically particular disciplinary mechanisms and forms of subjectivity that materialize in the workplace. Positing such a seamless relationship, Alvesson and Kärreman suggest, enables researchers to forego the hard, empirical work of examining the ways that such grand discourses are actually taken up, rejected, ignored, reworked, and so forth, by organization members. Their remedy for this problem is to suggest that 'little d' discourse studies (which they relabel 'Text-Focused Studies' [TFS]) and 'Big D' Discourse studies (which they relabel 'Paradigm-type Discourse Studies' [PDS]) be disconnected and addressed as separate phenomena.

Second, Alvesson and Kärreman identify the problem of 'overpacking' in discourse studies in which the term 'discourse' takes on an all-encompassing analytic role through which all organizational phenomena can be framed and understood. They argue that the analytic value of discourse is greatly diminished if it is permitted to take on such a ubiquitous role, and thus advocate the use of 'counter-balancing concepts' such as culture, institutions, ideology, material and social structures, norms, legislation, and so forth. For example, 'Culture provides a subtext to language use – a prestructured understanding. The same discourse (language use) in different cultures (meaning contexts) may lead to different receptions and meanings'.

Third, and related, Alvesson and Kärreman bemoan the extent to which discourse in both its TFS and PDS forms has been granted a degree of 'muscularity' whereby organizations are conceived as having no substance outside of their constitution through discursive practices. For Alvesson and Kärreman, the key issue here is the way in which the term 'constitutes' has taken on an almost magical quality (Harry Potter is duly invoked) with its invocation (incantation?) rarely, in their estimation, being accompanied by a complementary level of investigation.

On the face of it, such concerns seem reasonable. Certainly organizational discourse studies have not always done a good job of distinguishing 'Big D' and 'little d' studies, and researchers have been guilty of making claims using one or the other perspective that bleed over into the other domain of study. For example, Foucauldian studies have frequently made claims about the disciplinary effects of Discourses that ignore the dynamics of agentic actors in the workplace (Newton, 1998). Similarly, the relationships among the various conceptions of discourse and related terms such as culture, ideology, and communication have often been muddy and rather protean (Jian et al., 2008). And, as I indicated above, there is a tendency among organization scholars to take for granted the constitutive power of discourse and communication processes without appropriately problematizing and analyzing the discourse←→organization dialectic.

But I want to argue that in articulating solutions to these problems (disconnecting discourse and Discourse, counter-balancing concepts, and relativizing muscularity, respectively), Alvesson and Kärreman throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater and regress to a pre-linguistic turn conception of discourse that negates many of the generative possibilities that make organizational discourse studies so interesting and dynamic. While space does not permit me to unpack and critique Alvesson and Kärreman's argument in great detail, it is perhaps instructive to reproduce a couple of fairly lengthy quotations from their essay that, I think, exemplify their case for the retrenchment of discourse studies to a more conservative vision of the discourse-organization relationship:

> The discussion above has implications on the distinction between text-focused studies (TFS) and paradigm-type discourse studies (PDS). In cases where materiality and extra-discursive practices plays a significant role, like in cooking and assembling a car or a bridge, discourses arguably tend to be of interest from a TFS analysis point of view. The proper place for communication analysis in these cases is about the structure and content of the conversations that occurs around these objects and performances. Although we would argue that it is a stretch to think that these objects and performances primarily are *constituted* through communicative processes, the analysis of communicative processes embedding them certainly would tell us important things about how they operate in social reality.

> The layer of discursively carried meaning is powerful in many ways, but it is not all there is . . . The layer of meaning may always be important, and it may in some instances be the most important thing or even the only thing, but this is far from always the case. For example, cars, bridges, houses, machines, and meals rely on more things than imaginary meaning: for example, on concrete, steel, foodstuff or other materials. They also rely on performances for their actual construction: on welding, brick-laying, cooking and other forms of work. Their constitution is more a matter of materiality and performances than of meanings and words. In this case, words and meanings are more likely to facilitate that constitution of actual cars and bridges by the connective and instructive properties of language. This is also true for certain less material entities, such as the performance of services and rituals. Take for example, services like the cleaning of a house or activities like hiring or firing employees. Words are important for understanding what cleaning is all about but the actual performance is likely to be performed without a word. And hiring or firing decisions clearly involve words but also understandings about how complex institutions and social organizing works, and the actual implementation of these institutions.

For me, these two extracts are extraordinarily revealing in assessing the ways in which Alvesson and Kärreman are operationalizing their effort to 'discipline' organizational discourse studies.

First, let me address their reframing of the discourse/Discourse (TFS/PDS) relationship. This operates with a rather crude and, I would argue, arbitrary and capricious distinction between the discursive and the material that breaks down under even mild interrogation. In both extracts, Alvesson and Kärreman use activities and phenomena from everyday life to attempt to differentiate between discourse (talk, text) and the material world. Things like cars, cooking, bridges, cleaning, and so forth, and the activities that create them are clearly, for Alvesson and Kärreman, contexts where discourse plays a secondary, merely facilitative, role in the management of organizing. There are real things

that operate and exist independently of any talk about or around them. Thus, '[t]heir constitution is more a matter of materiality and performances than of meanings and words.'

But this framing presumes a neutrality that obscures a politics and an implicit epistemological position that Alvesson and Kärreman fail to interrogate. All of the named objects and activities are meaningful to us as objects and activities precisely because they are constructed through a complex intersection of discourses/Discourses, practices, institutional forms, historical precedents, power relations, and so forth. To argue that TFS studies are preferred in such contexts is to take for granted, rather than interrogate, the relationship between the discursive and the material. Moreover, their position simply asserts discourse as 'non-muscular' (wimpy?) and representational of a world that they hypostatize as material and existing independently from the discourses about it. They are, therefore, guilty of the same charge that they level against discourse scholars; they simply assert the respective places and functions of the discursive and the material, rather than bringing a discourse perspective to bear on exploring the dialectical relationship of the discursive and the material. Indeed, one might argue that they deploy a naive 'epistemology of common sense' (in which the world as it appears before us in its 'natural attitude' actually captures its essence) that predetermines the analytic mode that will be used to investigate the world.

To illustrate the arbitrariness of their moves here, let me develop some analytic vignettes around the everyday organizational act of cooking – an activity that Alvesson and Kärreman identify as unworthy of a full-blown 'discourse-as-constitutive' analysis, assigning communication and discourse a mere handmaiden role in such contexts. I provide three interrelated examples to illustrate why bifurcating cooking and discourse is at best arbitrary and at worst meaningless.

Cooking up discourse

The first example is relatively simple, but I think neatly encapsulates why making an arbitrary distinction between 'talk about cooking' and the 'materiality and extra discursive practices' that make up the act of cooking is a bad idea. Walker (2008) makes the interesting observation that 70 percent of Viking stoves – one of the most sought after and high end stoves on the market – are never used by their owners for the purpose for which they were built. I have no idea if this statistic is accurate, but even if the correct figure is only 40 percent it still tells us something interesting about a 'material, extra-discursive' object that sits in every kitchen – it is a material object that is discursively constructed and loaded with meanings. Examined within the broader (PDS?) discourse of post-Fordist consumption practices, a Viking range is a branded 'lifestyle' object that is one element in a complex array of discourses related to social actors' identity construction efforts. As such, it is 'always-already' meaningful as a cultural object, and thus it represents the intersection of the discursive and the material in interesting ways. Restricting such an analysis to TFS 'talk about cooking' would, then, miss a great deal that is discursively rich at a PDS level. For me, it is not at all a 'stretch' to think of something like a Viking range as communicatively constructed, given that it is already constructed as an object/brand within a broader consumption Discourse. The fact that it is made up of and constructed with 'extra-discursive' pieces of metal is actually the most trivial and least interesting thing about it,

particularly from a perspective that is interested in meaning, identity, the everyday, and so forth. Let me now add another layer of complexity to an act like cooking.

In many ways, the physical, material configuration of the contemporary kitchen is partly a result of competing Discourses that circulated through the early decades of the 20th century regarding the relationships among domesticity, modernity, the nature of womanhood (and manhood), and class (among other things). As Fordist capitalism gathered momentum and more and more women entered the workplace, the character of the domestic sphere shifted as the servant class dwindled in number and middle-class women found themselves running a household and preparing meals themselves.

This changing social, political, and economic environment prompted the emergence of various Discourses that aimed to make sense of and regulate such change. One such important Discourse was that related to processes of Taylorization, which began to change the character of work in the early 20th century, but that also had a significant impact on the domestic sphere. In particular, the research of Lillian Moller Gilbreth, a former collaborator of Frederick Winslow Taylor, brought the scientific method and efficiency principles to the kitchen precisely at the time when the demographic and economic shifts described above were occurring. Using scientific management principles, Gilbreth developed a successful consulting business focused on creating a more efficient and productive work environment for the early 20th century woman by, for example, reorganizing appliances to minimize the distance a woman would walk around the kitchen each day (Graham, 1999: 665).

But what is particularly interesting about Gilbreth's work for our purposes is the way in which it is discursively constructed to navigate between competing conceptions of the science-modernity-womanhood relationship. As Graham observes, Gilbreth had to carefully position herself between residues of the 19th century 'cult of domesticity' Discourse that saw the home (and women's household labors) as a haven and bulwark against the destabilizing effects of scientific and industrial progress, and modernist, progressive efforts that viewed 'efficiency' as a moral imperative. Gilbreth helped to articulate together these two competing discourses by framing efficiency and the modernist project as enabling women 'home-makers' or 'home managers' to better realize and enable the comforts of the home. As such, a 'good home-maker' was discursively constructed as: efficient – using scientific management principles in the home; a responsible mother – recognizing the psychological needs of family members and matching household chores to the character of each child; and being an intelligent consumer – analyzing purchases in terms of their quality and utility, and therefore bringing the home closer to the ideal of efficiency and psychological health (Graham, 1997).

Thus, the constituent features of the modern kitchen are at least partly the product of competition among various early 20th century Discourses regarding, for example, progress, modernity, science, production-consumption relations, the identity of women as producers/consumers, and so forth. In such a reading, where do the discourses end and the objects begin? They are, of course, coterminous and dialectic. The interest, from a discourse perspective, lies in teasing out how Discourses are materialized, and how the material (economic, political, ideological, institutional, etc.) shapes everyday discursive practices. Positing a priori the relationship of the D/discursive and the material in order to then determine the role and place of discourse reflects an incipient

functionalism and representational view of discourse that is decidedly pre-linguistic turn in its epistemological standpoint. Indeed, it presumes the correctness of the common sense 'natural attitude' – precisely the orientation to the world that good organizational discourse studies attempt to deconstruct.

Let me add a final layer of complexity to this example by playing with the act of cooking itself (anyone who is familiar with my cooking skills will be blanching right now). Again, the notion, propagated by Alvesson and Kärreman, that somehow the act of cooking would only be of interest to discourse scholars in terms of 'the structure and content of the conversations that occurs around these objects and performances' is deeply problematic in two ways: 1) it adopts the natural attitude in bifurcating discourses and objects and positioning the former as largely representational; and 2) it fails to account for the way that all objects and performances are positioned in and through larger Discourses.

Thus, it hardly goes without saying that cooking (and eating) is riven with complex Discourses that position it in different ways in different social and cultural contexts. It is never simply a material activity around which there is 'talk.' Murcott (1982), for example, provides an extensive anthropological analysis of the levels of meaning and significance that constitute 'the cooked dinner' and demonstrates the importance of the 'social organization of eating' (p. 678). Her analysis is remarkable in its unpacking of the complex semiosis of an everyday act (constructing and cooking a meal) that is almost banal in its routine character, but that nevertheless organizes familial and class relationships in meaningful and important ways. She effectively demonstrates how the 'material' act of cooking by the 'homemaker' requires adherence to a symbolic code and larger Discourses of class, the domestic sphere, and what constitutes 'work':

> [The cooked dinner] epitomized her obligation as homemaker, and her husband's as breadwinner. He can expect his dinner ready for his return home. The nature of the dinner, its mode of preparation, demand that the woman . . . be in the kitchen for a required time before his homecoming . . . Otherwise, the cooked dinner, clearly composed of appropriate items, could not be ready on time. If a job occupies how a man occupies his time during the working day . . . proper provision of a cooked dinner testifies that the woman has spent her time in correspondingly suitable fashion. Via the literal practice of its preparation in observance of the rules elaborated here, the cooked dinner in the end symbolizes the home itself, a man's relation to that home and the woman in it. (1982: 693)

Taken together, the intent of these three analytic vignettes is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the act of cooking, but rather to demonstrate how problematic it is – from a discourse perspective – to simply make an a priori, and yet empirical, claim about the role of D/discourse and its relationship to the material world. To do so not only reasserts the (pre-linguistic) subject-object dichotomy as the hidden yet guiding principle for analysis; it also makes 'communication as constitutive' of organizing an empirical question rather than an epistemological position. I am not here attempting to reduce ontology to epistemology, as Fairclough (2005) and other critical realists suggest, but rather arguing that the power of the field of discourse studies lies in its ability to unpack the dynamics of the D/discourse-material relationship in all its complexities and contradictions.

By reducing the question of discourse as constitutive to an empirical issue (is discourse constitutive of organization or merely facilitative?), Alvesson and Kärreman

place themselves in the position of arguing for either a transmission or a constitutive view of communication, depending on their (apparently common sense – see above) assessment of the particular context at hand. Thus, between 'Varieties of Discourse' 1.0 and 2.0 their position seems to have shifted from providing a metatheoretical framework through which to understand various epistemological approaches to discourse studies, to a rather administrative assessment of empirical, ontological claims of researchers. In this sense, they have reduced epistemology to ontology.

The important question, then, is not how we adjudicate between a 'Big D' and 'little d' focus, or between a muscular and autonomous view of discourse, but rather how we can adopt a genuinely post-linguistic turn view of discourse that avoids either a psychologization of meaning, or treats the material as somehow bifurcated from the discursive in any meaningful sense.

Let me now shift to a discussion of Alvesson and Kärreman's framing of the relationship between discourse and meaning – a relationship that is at the very heart of organizational discourse theory and research.

Discourse and meaning

> There is an Indian story – at least I heard it as an Indian story – about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested on the back of a turtle, asked (perhaps he was an ethnographer; it is the way they behave), what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? 'Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down.' (Geertz, 1973: 28–29)

Alvesson and Kärreman invoke Clifford Geertz's (1973) notion of 'thick description' to describe their approach to discourse studies. However, Geertz is speaking less about methodology and research design and more about the central tenet of interpretive anthropology – its focus on understanding *culture qua meaning* as enacted through cultural practices, text, and talk. The above quotation appears in the same famous 'Thick Description' essay and captures, I think, an essential element of what it 'means' (ahem) to study organizing – or any other form of human behavior – in a post-linguistic turn universe.

Geertz invokes this story to make two points about studying culture. First, that it is impossible to get to the 'bottom' of culture and, as such, any interpretive analysis will essentially be partial and incomplete; cultural meaning systems are infinitely complex and will defy any analyst's attempt to fully capture them. Second, Geertz is suggesting that culture goes 'all the way down'; that is, however hard we try to get to the 'foundations' upon which meanings are built, we cannot do so. This is because meanings are not somehow separate from other aspects of human behavior, material or otherwise; rather, they permeate everything, and are therefore inseparable from the practices, objects, institutions, power relations, and so forth, that they define. In this sense, meaning exists and is enacted at the intersection of the (constituting) subject and (constituted) object.

Contra Geertz, however, Alvesson and Kärreman enact a different conception of meaning, at several points invoking what might be called a 'geological' perspective. For

them, meaning appears to be something like a symbolic overlay – a 'topsoil,' as it were – that covers the practices and material structures that make up social forms. From this view, the job of the discourse analyst is to dig through the symbolic topsoil to see what lies beneath in the material substrata – does the level of meaning and the symbolic reflect what lies beneath, or does it act like a hall of mirrors that distorts material reality?

Such a position is clear in the two passages quoted above. For them, meaning is clearly an aspect of organization that can be distinguished and analyzed separately from the other aspects of human behavior, including the material and the practical. Alvesson and Kärreman invoke this kind of imagery in part because they are attempting to undo what they perceive as the problematic consequences of an overly 'muscular' view of discourse where talk and text are made to do all the work of organizing. As I indicated earlier, I have some sympathy for this position. But in arguing for a more 'relativized' conception of discourse they end up positioning discourse and, in particular, meaning, in a very odd relationship to the rest of the organizing process.

If we look again at the first part of the second quotation from Alvesson and Kärreman's essay above:

> The layer of discursively carried meaning is powerful in many ways, but it is not all there is . . . The layer of meaning may always be important, and it may in some instances be the most important thing or even the only thing, but this is far from always the case. For example, cars, bridges, houses, machines, and meals rely on more things than imaginary meaning . . .

and then juxtapose this with the following quotation from an earlier portion of the essay:

> A somewhat different aspect concerns the possible discrepancy between language use and meaning. Sometimes these are married . . . However, conversation and similar language use do not guarantee shared meaning.

then a strange understanding of the discourse-meaning-materiality relationship emerges.

First, 'meaning' is positioned as both 'imaginary' and 'shared.' Here, there appears to be a strong cognitive element to Alvesson and Kärreman's conception of meaning – meanings only become relevant when widely internalized by organization members. Discourse, then, becomes important and 'muscular' when attached to meanings that pervade the organization. In this context, the idea of 'imaginary' meaning seems to position it as largely ideational and cognitive; in other words, things like cars, bridges, and machines have an obdurate materiality that cannot be confounded or wished away by any meanings that may be constructed around and about them. Meaning, then, shifts from 'imaginary' to 'shared' (and presumably discourse from 'wimpy' to 'muscular') when organizational talk, meanings, and material practices align.

As I have indicated at length above, this particular conception of the discourse-meaning-materiality relationship is especially problematic because of the way it bifurcates the discursive and the material instead of exploring their dynamic, dialectical relationship, as well as situating the material as somehow 'extra-cultural' and existing outside of the domain of meaning.

But, in addition, the apparent location of meaning in the heads of actors and thus only meaningful (i.e. worthy of study) if 'shared,' creates additional problems from an

organizational discourse perspective. As Clifford Geertz famously indicated, 'culture is public because meaning is public' (1973: 12). In this sense, culture and meaning do not exist in social actors' heads as cognitive structures (a view that Geertz explicitly critiques), but rather get played out in the dynamics of everyday discourses, practices, rituals, and so forth. Discourses, then, are not to be studied to gain access to mental processes, but as formations of social phenomena. If meaning is somehow 'inside the heads' of autonomous social actors, then organizational discourse studies are reduced to analyzing member discourses as manifestations of already formed meanings – a view that positions discourse as epiphenomenal to both meaning and culture, rather than as medium and outcome of the dynamics of meaning construction.

For Alvesson and Kärreman, then, meaning does not seem to be something that is dynamic and negotiated, played out in the moment-to-moment through complex and frequently contradictory discourses, practices, and identities. Instead, discourses and meanings are studied to see whether they 'match up' together or not. For me, on the other hand, part of the importance of discourse studies lies in its exploration of the indeterminacy of meaning and the ways that often contradictory meanings are discursively articulated together to create loose structures of signification that can incorporate a variety of organizational subject positions.

Moreover, it is precisely the *lack* of shared meaning in the organizing process that, in part, makes discourse studies worth doing. The really exciting and insightful research reveals 'shared meaning' as actually the uneasy coexistence of multiple interpretations and enactments of what at first blush and from an epistemology of common sense appears to be 'the same reality,' at least from a managerial point of view (e.g. Fleming, 2007; Kunda, 1992; Young, 1989). In trying to unpack the complexities of 'turtles all the way down,' the issue becomes figuring out how multiple and tension-filled sense-making efforts and organizational performances manage to exist side-by-side in ostensibly 'the same' organizing process. The answer is not to 'get inside' people's heads, but rather to explore the dynamics and complexities of public meaning-making as people go about their daily organizational lives.

One does not have to imbue discourse with a 'magical muscularity' in order to adopt such a position, nor do we have to adopt a 'nothing but discourse' perspective. And we certainly do not have to radically bifurcate the discursive and the material, or legislate the appropriate time to do discourse (TFS) or Discourse (PDS) studies. Indeed, it's ironic that Alvesson and Kärreman approvingly reference Fairclough's (2005: 915) critical realist critique of organizational discourse studies' 'commitment to postmodernism and extreme versions of social constructivism [sic],' but then go on to miss a quite useful characterization of the discourse/Discourse relationship:

> [O]ne cannot chose between 'big 'D'' and 'small 'd'' approaches in discourse analysis: discourse analysis is concerned with the relationship between processes/events and practices (as well as structures), texts and discourses (as well as genres and styles) and therefore in . . . the relationship between 'big "D"' and 'small "d"' discourses . . . The objective of discourse analysis, on this view, is not simply analysis of discourse per se, but analysis of the relations between discourse and non-discoursal elements of the social, in order to reach a better understanding of these complex relations (including how changes in discourse can cause changes in other elements). (Fairclough, 2005: 919–920, 924)

Despite Alvesson and Kärreman's (and, indeed, Fairclough's) claims of magical muscularity run rampant in organizational discourse studies, I suspect that there are few scholars in the area who would disagree with Fairclough's characterization of the discourse/Discourse and discourse/non-discourse relationships.

Concluding remarks

There are numerous other issues that I could take up in this response, but space is limited. Let me conclude by posing a question that I see as central to the organizational discourse studies enterprise: as discourse scholars how can we bring insight to objects and activities like cars and car construction, cooking and cleaning, and multiple other forms of organizing, not as objects and activities tout court, but as implicated in, and working in a dialectical relationship with, the D/discourses and meaning systems that make our world intelligible both individually and collectively?

One of the problems with Alvesson and Kärremsan's bifurcation of the material and the discursive is that the material is rarely 'just that,' nor is it always visible. How, for example, do we adequately account for class in our analyses if we don't examine the ways that the material (including the economic and political) is normalized through discourses and various systems of signification? As Rachel Sherman indicates in her study of the luxury hotel industry, 'normalization depends on interaction' (2006: 260). In this sense it doesn't just represent and facilitate the material, but enacts and constitutes it in important ways. People carry 'the material' with them – they are agents of the material, not in any simple, causal sense, but in their articulation and imbrication within a nexus of economic, political, and social structures.

Furthermore, no-one, I think, would want to deny the material existence of cars, cooking, cleaning, bridges, and so forth. But what is interesting from a discourse and communication perspective is the politics of their construction in the context of certain mediated realities. Cooking is never just cooking; bridge/tunnel building is never just that (witness the ways in which the material act of building a New Jersey/Manhattan tunnel has recently been discursively and ideologically mediated out of existence!).

Alvesson and Kärreman, however, revert to a troubling information-based conception of discourse that is the only way they can legitimate the bifurcation of the discursive and the material 'for analytic purposes.' One can adopt economic, political, psychological, or sociological perspectives on human behavior (all of which constitute objects of study through discursive moves), but the question for discourse scholars is, if we are interested in studying human behavior from a post-linguistic turn perspective, how do we best capture the ways that the constituting and constituted are created in relation to each other? What are the politics in particular conceptions and constructions of the material? What possibilities for organizing are enabled and what others are closed off?

To argue, as Alvesson and Kärreman do, that 'If "discourse constitutes" then one may of course be uninterested in action/behavior "as such"', not only reasserts an insidious subject-object dichotomy, but also ignores the fact that interest lies in the *relationship* between the constituted (organizations and organizing behavior) and the constituting (various D/discourses).

Many decades ago, phenomenologists like Husserl and Heidegger recognized the important truth that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something; there is no such thing as human consciousness that is not interrogated by and oriented to an already constituted world. Moreover, intentionality (in the phenomenological sense) is built into the always-already meaningful 'objective' world that we move through in the moment-to-moment of our everyday lives. In this sense, subjectivities are objectified and material objects and events are subjectified (Fleming and Spicer, 2007). This is why it is so dangerous to make 'common sense' assumptions about what is material/real and what is discursive/symbolic; from a discourse perspective, the point, it seems to me, is to do the hard work of investigating the ways in which the discursive and the material, the situated text/talk and macro-discourses, are implicated in one another.

The irony, of course, is that Alvesson and Kärreman have to make discursively constitutive moves in order to bifurcate the discursive and the material in the way that they do. It takes a lot of hard, discursive work to constitute an information-based view of discourse and a cognitive view of meaning! As such, Alvesson and Kärreman are clearly greatly troubled by what they see as the rampant and unjustified social constructionism that has hijacked organizational discourse studies. Theirs is a call for temperance, but it is a call that is rooted in a decidedly regressive, reductive, and revisionist conception of the philosophical tradition that reframed our understanding of who we are as human beings in a linguistically mediated world. Of course, we all know what became of the last temperance movement. I suspect that the latest call will meet the same end.

Funding

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