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Pedagogy and the 'Linguistic Turn': Developing Understanding Through Semiotics

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Abstract

The appropriation of the 'linguistic' turn and the application of social constructionist ideas for research projects situated in organizational contexts and concerned with managerial work has enriched the field's understanding of the complexities of such settings and drawn attention to their processual nature. Using the unifying theory of a semiotic framework, we argue for a similar appropriation of the 'linguistic turn' in teaching projects, to give students of management a theoretically informed access to, and understanding of, this growing literature. Employing the understanding and vocabulary of semiotics as applied to metaphor, discourse and stories, we demonstrate how semiotic principles can be used to explore the mechanics of meaning making and expose the taken for granted assumptions inherent in this process.

Introduction

In this paper we explore how meaning making is at the heart of the 'linguistic turn' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) in organisational and management research and put forward an argument for its inclusion in management pedagogy through a semiotic framework (Tietze, Cohen & Musson, 2003). We do so because linguistically turned organizational and management research is on the increase in Europe and the US (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001), accompanied by a growing interest in the related area of Critical Management Studies (Grey 2004)[i]. Yet pedagogy within Western Business Schools rarely includes frameworks for understanding or appreciating the knowledge generated by this discursive plurality, thus denying management students the ability to judge, for themselves, the theoretical and practical usefulness of these approaches. We believe that the understanding and vocabulary generated by semiology can fill this gap, and contribute to providing critical and reflective management education.

In this paper we aim to demonstrate the utility of a semiotic approach in the pedagogic context. First, we discuss some fundamental principles of linguistically turned research, and point to the absence of theoretical approaches for understanding the actual mechanics of meaning making processes. We go on to explore the central principles of semiotics as a unifying theoretical framework for developing understanding about how meaning is made, confirmed and/or contested. We argue that this knowledge can nurture the development of students' reflexivity through a move from practical consciousness: 'what people know how to do' at a tacit level, to the development of discursive consciousness: 'what actors are able to 'talk about' and in what manner or guise they are able to talk about it' (Giddens, 1979: 73). The development of discursive consciousness generates insight into how knowledge and taken for granted understandings are situated, and produced through an interactive process predicated on social action, highlighting the central role of language in this process (Burr, 1995).

The linguistic turn, meaning making and management education

A central principle of the linguistic turn is the notion of meaning as contested – what Vivian Burr (1995) has called denaturalisation. This view is based on social constructionist ideas about reality, knowledge and language which challenge the paradigmatic apriori(s) of scientific-technical approaches to the idea of management as a morally neutral, context free activity, based on objective knowledge (Beatty, 2004). Language from this latter perspective is regarded, if at all, as purely representational, which unproblematically describes a reality 'out there'. The proposition that social reality is constructed and that social interactions are an essential part of this process (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) has launched an attack on

such thinking. Within this epistemology language is central to the process of constructing social reality - it is productive, formative and creative – it makes things happen.

This approach underpins the 'linguistic turn' in Organization Theory and/or Management, a shift characterised not only by an examination of the role of language in the constitution and reproduction of organisational processes and practices, but also by the emergence of critical perspectives which pose a challenge to organisation theory based on an essentialist view of social reality (Chia and King, 2001; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). At the heart of such perspectives is the idea that we no longer take meaning for granted, but acknowledge that meanings are social constructs, produced, reproduced and transformed in particular social contexts. Furthermore, people positioned differently see the world in different ways, so that meaning is not understood as unitary (Mingers, 2000). Whilst certain interpretations may predominate, there are always other versions – even though these are sometimes eclipsed by the more powerful voices (see for example Fulop, 2002 and Wolfe Morrison and Milliken 2003).

The linguistic turn and critical approaches to researching management place meaning making at centre stage (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), acknowledging that management activity is inherently political (Grey, 2004). Sometimes this is aimed at making managers more effective (Holman and Thorpe, 2003), reflecting the view that managers are essentially word merchants (Bate, 1994: 257), who need to be adept in particular 'language games' and able to forge particular images in pursuit of managerial effectiveness. However, in spite of its importance, very little attention is

given to the mechanics of how meaning is made in research texts or management education. There could be a number of explanations for this neglect. First, it could be that writers assume that readers already understand the processes whereby meaning is made. This is curious because as most readers of such texts do not have a background in linguistics, why would they? Because we all engage in meaning making all of the time does not mean that we understand the mechanics of how it works, any more than we understand the physiology of our own bodies. Second, it could be that writers acknowledge the importance of such understanding, but do not think it their job to teach it. In response we would ask whose job is it? If we want management students to engage with the linguistic turn and critical management ideas, it is up to us to give them approaches that enable them to do this. Third, it could be that writers feel that an appreciation of how the meaning making process works is not very important. In our view, such a position is akin to making claims about quantitative data with no understanding of the mechanics of statistics, or how to interpret them.

In addition to nurturing what, in our view, will be better informed, more critical and more thoughtful managers, we have found that students who do not understand the processes of meaning making find 'linguistically turned' research fairly incomprehensible[ii]. In contrast, those with a basic knowledge of meaning making processes have a new literature and language at their fingertips, and are in a position to benefit from its rich insights. Debates at the heart of the linguistic turn (e.g. power and discipline, silence and din, order and disorder, performativity and reflectivity) can be understood as relationships between signifiers and signifieds, between signs, and between sign systems – principles and concepts derived from semiology. Having grasped these fundamental principles, students have the understanding and,

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importantly, the vocabulary, to engage with such debates. Of course many effective communicators know nothing of semiology as a theoretical frame. But we argue that familiarity with the basic principles of semiology provides a theoretical base that can facilitate a deeper level of understanding, and thus facilitate reflexive practice.
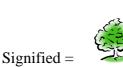
Semiology: Concepts central to meaning making

Our starting point is the idea that human beings communicate through symbols. This approach is now widely recognized in management and organization studies where, in contrast to more rational, materialist perspectives, there is a growing literature focusing on the symbolic dimension of organizational life. This literature examines the ways in which a range of symbols: linguistic, artefactual, aesthetic, performative, are constituted and negotiated within organizations, and their salience for individuals' experience of work (see for example the 2004 (29/4) special issue of The Academy Of Management Review).

Semiology, a linguistic theory derived by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1915, tr.1974) is based on the idea of meaning making as the negotiation of symbols, or in his terms, signs. Within semiology, the sign is a two-sided concept consisting of a signifier and a signified. The signifier refers to the material aspect (denotation), while the signified refers to the mental aspect (connotation). The sign 'tree' could thus be analysed as:

Signifier =   t-r-e-e

SIGN =

Signified =

As a linguist, Saussure's primary concern was the *linguistic* sign. However, as we have already indicated, the term 'sign' can refer to any cultural text, including images, sounds, objects, artefacts and behaviours. Thus, a semiological approach can be used to explore a wide range of organizational process and activities, from attendance at meetings to lunchtime rituals or the use of information systems, examining how these sign systems are interpreted and appropriated and with what implications.

The relationship between signs and the social/cultural context

Crucially, what a particular sign means is not inevitable. That is, the relationship between a signifier and a signified is not in any sense fixed or immutable. Rather, it is constructed, based on our socio-political and cultural agreement and usage. The key point here is that the signifier and signified refer to different levels of meaning: the material level and the mental level, with the sign as the concept representing the combination of the two. Taking the simple example above, while the signifier is the word 'tree', the signified could be an oak, a palm, a bonsai or a whole host of other possibilities, depending on where one lives etc. Although the signifier and the signified always work together (there can never be one without the other), the actual bond between them is arbitrary (rather than 'natural') and determined by cultural agreement. We can demonstrate this in a management education context, through Mingers' (2000) study, in which it was discovered that the signifier 'critical' connoted different ideas and practices to different academics. Significantly, though, we are not suggesting that individuals have a free reign as to how signifiers are interpreted; rather, we stress the fundamentally social (and political) nature of the meaning making process.

This leads us to question how it is that certain signifiers come to mean. According to Saussure (and others, for example see Williamson's 1994 classic semiological analysis of advertising), we make sense of signs (objects, words, actions) in relation to other signs. Central here is the concept of binary opposition, where we come to understand one dimension (for example 'good') in relation to its opposite ('bad'). Although rarely explained, these concepts are fundamental to 'linguistically turned' organisation studies, where binary opposites such as masculinity and feminity; success and failure; autonomy and control have come under critical scrutiny. An interesting illustration is Tsoukas' use of binary opposition in his study of the Brent Spar oilrig debacle, in which the relationship between Greenpeace and Shell is compared to that of David and Goliath (1999). Likewise, Barley's (1983) semiotic analysis of funeral homes offers an illuminating example of the importance of relationality in creating meaning. He identifies three key, and related, sign systems: the homes' interior décor, other related settings (hospitals and private houses) and the positioning of the corpses themselves (posed so as to appear 'lifelike'). Barley argues that this semiological analysis, based on exploring the relationships between these different sign systems, illuminates aspects of the sector's unique culture, aspects that other analytic techniques fail to reveal. In his view, semiology provides access to the 'interpretive structure that lends a culture its coherence' (1983: 39).

Furthermore, signs and their meanings cannot be divorced from their contexts. The idea of the relationship between the signifier and signified as arbitrary does not suggest that anything goes, or that meaning making can be seen as purely individualistic or idiosyncratic. Rather, it is only through social agreement that the meaning of a particular signified comes to be accepted as legitimate. In this sense,

meaning making is a process and product of collectives, generated in particular times and places, and by particular people. Thus, the meanings we make cannot be extracted or divorced from the cultural and political stages on which they are played out, and are inextricable from the patterns of control, subordination and resistance in which they are embedded. Thus, signs are seen to reflect, sustain and constitute their particular social and cultural contexts. But significantly, the process of establishing consensus in collective contexts usually does not happen on a conscious level. In most cases we are not aware of our active involvement in meaning making even though it might involve struggles over power and legitimacy. This is vividly depicted in a study recently undertaken to evaluate the new Modern Matron role in the UK National Health Service (Read et al 2004), where the sign 'Matron' was interpreted differently by different groupings, such as patients, doctors and nurses. These different interpretations, based largely on collective past experiences and ideas about the 'old' Matron role (demonstrating Derrida's (1978) point that all meanings contain 'traces' of past meanings) were not articulated initially; indeed why would they be when they were held at a deep-rooted subconscious level? Still, they informed discussions and negotiations involving expectations of the different groups about power and legitimacy in relation to practice; who should/could fill that role, what they would achieve, and the level of influence they would have.

Our discussion so far can be summarised in terms of these five fundamental principles of semiology:

1. We make meaning through our <u>shared</u> use of symbols or signs, including language as a symbolic sign system;

2. What a sign means is not inevitable. Rather, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is <u>arbitrary</u>, based on our socio-political and cultural agreement and usage;

3. Meaning is <u>relational</u>. That is, we make sense of signs (any cultural text, including artefacts, words, behaviours) in relation to other signs;

4. Signs can not be divorced from their <u>contexts</u>;

5. Our engagement with the process of meaning-making is largely <u>subliminal</u> (which might go some way to explaining why it has been so neglected by writers working in this area).

At the beginning of this section we argued that introducing management students to the rudiments of semiology gives them a theoretical framework to engage with the linguistic turn, as well as the vocabulary to do so. In this spirit, then, just as a statistician needs to practice using statistical instruments and techniques, so too we need to apply and work with the terms and concepts we introduce. In what follows, we show how our understandings of metaphor, discourse and story/narrative can be further enhanced through an awareness of semiology.

Metaphors and their role in meaning making

Gareth Morgan (1986) pointed to the way we use metaphor to understand and theorise about organisations almost two decades ago[iii]. Some have argued that this approach has been covered sufficiently in organization studies (Oswick et al 2002), whilst others argue that there is still more to be gained from employing metaphor (and other related tropes) as a tool for generating theoretical understanding (Hamilton, 2003, Musson and Tietze, 2004). Yet, there is little understanding shown in the literature of

how metaphor actually works to create certain meanings and obscure others (or the implications of this) and nothing as far as we are aware in standard managerial texts. Exploring this process through the concepts and language of semiology nurtures understanding of this complex topic and the meaning making process more generally.

Metaphors can produce a new way of looking at or understanding a familiar object, event or process, but only because of the fundamental semiotic principle that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. They work though linking two previously unrelated signs (or subject domains), using an existing signifier to create a 'new' signified, and in this sense they are creative, and can provide a new perspective on a particular issue. Cohen et al's (1972) familiar garbage can metaphor for decision making is a good example of this process, demonstrating how decision making in organisations involves a multitude of factors (people; time constraints; previous solutions) that might influence the decision making process, highlighting the 'messy' nature of this procedure and perhaps obscuring more rational aspects of realist explanations. This example raises two important issues about meaning making and metaphor that are not commonly highlighted in the 'linguistic turn' literature. First, to understand this metaphor one has to 'know' what a garbage can is, what it normally contains and how it might be used before one can decode it as it was intended. In other words, understanding generated by metaphor is always culturally mediated, and a product of shared understandings. This means that one has no control about how a specific metaphor might be decoded in other, different cultural contexts. Ortony (1975: 47) calls this the particularisation process, or the 'filling in of the details between linguistic signposts present in the message'. This 'filling in' is the dynamic (and ultimately uncontrollable) characteristic of meaning making. Second,

all metaphors highlight some aspects of a situation, event or process but obscure others. In time however, we can lose sight of this and metaphors can appear 'dead' (Tsoukas, 1991). The original creative connection is concealed in subliminal understanding; so deeply embedded in our thinking as to appear natural, normal and true. The metaphor 'Time is money' is a good example of this.

'Time is Money' is the key *metaphorical* concept underpinning the logic of industrial production, and the principles of scientific management (Taylor 1911/1967). Taylorist ideas about how to generate the most efficient production system that will yield maximum profit are at the root of the metaphor, illustrating how every metaphor is a product of its social context. As a result of the power and prevalence of the metaphor, time has become a measurable resource that can be planned, controlled and efficiently administered (Sabelis 2001) and our minds have become 'saturated with the equation "time is money"' (Thompson 1967: 95). Students, and indeed wider society more generally, often find the idea that time is **not** money difficult to wrestle with, because the metaphor has truly suffused western thinking, structuring relationships inside, and importantly, outside of work, illustrating the fundamental semiotic principle that our engagement with the meaning making process is largely subliminal. Using semiology as a framework helps to 'denaturalise' the linking of time with money, revealing that it is, indeed, a metaphor. Realist thinking does not facilitate an appreciation of this, either in or out of the management education context.

Using semiology to understand how metaphors work can also help us to see how metaphors structure our thinking about the 'new' in terms of the 'old'. Indeed, it is impossible to understand new concepts and ideas without using 'old' language, which

inevitably carries traces of other meanings (Derrida, 1978). Take for example, the metaphors inherent in the terms *internet, world wide web,* or *information highway.* Each draws on ideas of this new communication medium as a network or web, of roads or of fibres and filaments; ideas already familiar to us in our cultural context. Conceptualising it this way gives us a frame (crucially, already known to us) on which to hang our understanding of this new medium. We 'understand' what 'highways' and 'webs' look like and the basic properties that enable them to connect different locations and nodes. It is not difficult therefore for us to think that we understand how the Internet actually works (even though we might not), because we liken it to these common objects and imbue it with their characteristics, even though the relationship between the old and new is arbitrary. Familiar, culturally acceptable concepts act as metaphors for the unfamiliar, and this very familiarity enables us to understand an alien object or idea, and the way it might work for us. But of course, this familiar understanding also constrains, because just as we are able to understand this new phenomena through old concepts such as 'windows', 'files' and 'folders' for example, we will also see and experience this new technology in terms of the limits and restrictions of those old concepts.

Metaphorical language allows us to express something for which no words have yet been invented, but at the same time semiological principles demonstrate that we are constrained to use only those metaphors that reflect our own shared habits, or structures, or ways of thinking about the world. We have yet to see an appreciation of the latter reflected in mainstream organization studies/management research and teaching, even though as Harrison (2003) demonstrates, metaphors are consistently used to conceptualise functions such as Human Resource Management (HRM - see

for example Sisson's (1995) ideas about HRM as a 'Cinderella' function, Sparrow and Marchington's (1998) 'black hole' conceptualisation of HRM, or Putnam and Kolb's (2000) ideas about feminist challenges to dominant patriarchal metaphors underpinning traditional models of negotiation). Applying semiotic principles highlights the creative/constraining aspects of metaphor use, and by exposing the arbitrary relationship between the sign (the metaphor) and that which is signified (the new perspective) it also demonstrates the culturally bound nature of metaphoric thinking. Both aspects are central to developing reflective and reflexive students of management.

Discourse: understanding and accessing diverse and opaque perspectives

The transdisciplinary background of the concept of discourse (with roots in linguistics, cognitive psychology, sociology, post-structuralism and literary theory - see Potter, 1997) has both benefits and limitations in 'linguistic turn' research. This eclecticism can provide richness and analytic potential, but conversely, the lack of consensus can create apprehension about using the term at all – for fear of using it incorrectly. Here again, we argue that a basic understanding and application of semiological principles can provide us with a means of accessing, analysing and discussing such texts.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) see discourse analytic research as having two separate, but related, strands; the study of social talk and the study of how social reality is discursively constructed and maintained. The latter reflects our concerns, both in this paper and in our research more generally. We use Watson's definition, loosely based on the work of the French philosopher and writer Foucault, of discourse

as 'A connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitute a way of talking about a particular issue, thus framing the way in which people understand and respond with respect to that issue' (1995: 814). Watson also describes how discourses function as menus of discursive resources that social actors might draw on in different ways at different times to achieve their particular purposes depending on the context[iv].

This definition resonates with a number of points raised in our discussion of semiology. First, Watson argues that discourses 'frame' our understandings, echoing the view that our interpretations are culturally situated, and that signs derive their meaning from established and shared understandings, and familiar contexts. We understand cultural texts - language, artefacts or behaviours - in terms of what we *already* know (or think we know) about them: their contents, contexts and what we know about other texts like that. When we find ourselves in new situations, we access our stocks of knowledge of (what we think of as) similar situations, drawing on deep-rooted 'default assumptions' (Kittay, 1987) to get by. Thus, our competency in one cultural setting enables us to make sense of and operate within other settings. The idea that this knowledge is tacit is important because we apply our cultural knowledge to diverse settings without explicit recognition of engaging in this process, in other words at a subliminal level. Our cultural knowledge becomes the 'natural' way to view objects and events.

Second, implicit in this notion of framing is the idea that knowledge cannot be seen as neutral or objective (Clegg & Ross-Smith, 2003). Rather, areas of knowledge are always mediated, or shaped in particular ways, reflecting 'prevailing values, norms,

beliefs and relations of power' (Jackson and Carter, 2000, p. 66). In our discussion of semiology, we put forward the idea of meaning making as relational rather than referential. That is, a signifier – in this case a discourse - does not refer to a single, uncontested reality that exists 'out there'. Rather, its meaning is derived consensually, in relation to other signifiers, and it defines who can speak, on what topic, in which context and styles and for what purpose (Jackson and Carter, 2000). We can illustrate this process of relationality through the ubiquitous discourse of 'teamwork'.

The ubiquitous teamwork discourse is typically characterized through terms like empowerment, participation and collaboration, and is constructed in opposition to 'out-dated' Taylorist notions of linear production processes and individual effort (Baldry et al, 1998, p. 168), though interestingly it is still underpinned by the Taylorist 'time is money' metaphor. Within the dominant (sometimes described as naturalised) discourse on teamwork alternative voices go unheard because embedded within discourses are issues of power, influence and status, about who can speak legitimately about a topic, and who cannot. Thus, within the dominant version of the teamwork discourse, certain people are constructed as 'good team players' simultaneously prescribing those attitudes, values and behaviours which are acceptable, and those which are deviant. In this way employee's identities and value are constructed and regulated through the teamwork discourse, and their response to it. But this is not the only view of the teamwork discourse. Sennett (1998) offers quite a different interpretation. A far cry from the joys of collaboration, he suggests 'Teamwork, though, takes us into that domain of demeaning superficiality which besets the modern workplace. Indeed, teamwork exists in the realm of tragedy to enact human relations as a farce' (1998, p. 106). Using a semiotic framework we can

understand Sennett's alternative take as another, equally legitimate relational view of the dominant discourse, which often goes unheard, drowned instead by the overwhelming chorus of approval of the benefits of teamworking arrangements. Here the concepts of 'preferred reading' and 'reading against the grain' are useful. Although at any given time certain discursive frames might appear dominant, this is not to say that they eradicate all other meanings. Meaning is mediated through different discourses and reflects the interests and values of particular groups and institutions, but at the same time the pervasiveness of the dominant discourses can mean that they often appear to be 'natural' and 'true'. How and why this can come about is revealed by a semiotic analysis.

Notwithstanding the power of dominant discourses, individuals can, and do resist, drawing on different, oppositional discourses, skilfully creating divergent meanings, reconstructing dominant discourses and negotiating understandings in light of their own circumstances (see for example Clegg & Ross-Smith's (2003) and Fulop's (2002) ideas about the dominance of the US orthodoxy in the management education discourse). Applying a semiotic framework to this process can help us to question the 'normalcy of the normal' (Clegg & Ross-Smith, 2003, p. 92). Applying the fundamental semiological principle of meaning making as relational leads us to see how discourses cannot be seen as operating in isolation, referring to one single uncontested view of reality, but derive their meaning in dynamic interaction with other discourses.

Stories, Storytelling and Myth

Given the ubiquity of stories in organizational theory as well as practice, it is curious that within organization studies, relatively little attention has been paid to understanding how stories actually work to generate meaning. Just as a basic understanding of the principles of semiology can shed light on the role of metaphor and discourse in meaning making, so it can provide insights into how stories and storytelling generate meaning. We have already shown how an awareness of the relationship between the signifier and the signified sharpens our understanding of metaphor and discourse, highlighting both as culturally and temporally embedded; elucidating the power-play implicit in struggles over meaning, dominance and voice; and shedding light on the role of discourse and metaphor in the reproduction and transformation of knowledge. Similar points can be made in relation to stories (Gabriel, 2000; Salzer-Morling, 1998) because stories, like other signs, work symbolically. That is, as semiotic systems, stories do not refer to an objective truth. Rather, their connotations are contextually and relationally situated and defined. In this sense, we bring to stories our existing frames of knowledge, and indeed cannot understand them if they draw on other, culturally different frames.

We might demonstrate these points through the following story, told to us during a project investigating how values inform management practice:

> When I came home from my last day at national service, my Mum was waiting for me. She said, 'come on, sit down, your tea is ready on the kitchen table'. I said, 'just give me 5 minutes, Mum'. I went out into the garden and made a fire. I threw my uniform, my boots, my rucksack and anything that bloody reminded me of those days on it, and burnt it. Then I sat down and had my tea… I made a promise to me on that day. Never again in my life would anyone push me around.

While the story itself referred to a unique event, it was also used by the speaker to explain why he *"had become the kind of manager I am now"*. In his account, he went on to describe how he boycotted bureaucratic fiat whenever he could and had acquired a reputation as a maverick – a reputation he cherished and cultivated – through telling this story and others like it. The story served as a symbol of this manager's style and approach to his work, as a frame through which he made sense of his experiences and actions, and thereby endowed them with meaning. The burning of the standardized clothing is a highly charged symbolic act, but if the audience does not acknowledge the symbolic importance to the actor of setting the uniform alight, the story is without meaning. Or the story might be interpreted in a different way, perhaps as an act of sabotage, disloyalty or even treason in some contexts.

In his fascinating analysis of myth, French cultural theorist Roland Barthes (1973), in common with other semiologists, made a distinction between the signifier (denotation) and the signified (connotation). But he also described a third level that he referred to as myth (using the term in the traditional sense of stories through which a culture explains aspects of its reality). Early myths dealt with questions of good and evil, love, nature and disease, but in his book, *Mythologies,* Barthes focused on more recent myths, concerning issues such as femininity, ethnicity, work and family. Exploring how these are reflected and constituted through our sign systems, he argues that these social products can be associated with dominant and subordinate interests. From this perspective, the crucial power of myth is that it renders the semiological workings behind these relationships invisible; myths operate as part of the process whereby understandings become normal and obvious. These everyday myths become embedded in our established ways of thinking, naturalised, to the extent that we are

scarcely aware of them. In this way we do not recognise myths as socially constructed stories (working in the interests of some groups, and against those of others) but as social facts; natural and true. Through exposing the signifying practices through which we construct our cultural worlds, Barthes poses a challenge to the naturalising effects of grand narratives, and opens up the possibility of challenge and resistance posed by alternative versions.

In our view, this third dimension of semiology has particular relevance to organisation theory, providing insights into the ideological scaffolding upon which our understandings of organisations are based, a topic not normally covered in routine management texts. In particular, it leads us to question the totalizing effects of grand corporate narratives, to a consideration of alternative, more local interpretations. For example, in considering the myths inherent in representations of companies that have a particularly strong public image, and the extent to which these persist (and by what mechanisms), or have been challenged by alternative stories being told both within and outside of the organization. Returning to the Brent Spar example introduced earlier, Tsoukas (1999) considers the myths associated with Shell and Greenpeace, exploring the symbolic process by which Greenpeace tapped into the public's deep anxieties about pollution and environmental despoliation, and into the cultural inclination to support the underdog (the seemingly powerless David in the face of the giant Goliath). Tsoukas explains how in doing so, Greenpeace managed to generate widespread support, seizing the ideological agenda and forcing Shell to abandon its plans to dispose of the Brent Spar in the North Sea.

Stories and storytelling, then, serve as a way of interpreting experience and rendering it meaningful. Whilst as both storytellers and listeners we are all adept at using stories, this symbolic framing and subsequent decoding of symbols happens on a largely subliminal level. We know when a story resonates, and have all experienced the frustration of telling a story that our audience 'doesn't get'. Without an appropriate analytical framework and vocabulary, it is difficult to explain why this is so. We argue that semiology provides such a framework and vocabulary.

Commentary

Our exploration of linguistically turned concepts demonstrates how semiology can provide a unifying theoretical framework for accessing meaning making processes in a multitude of contexts, and importantly provides a vocabulary for doing so. This, we argue, can make the insights generated by the 'linguistic turn' (and related critical analysis) accessible in management education contexts. As academics we appreciate linguistically turned contributions in the overall field of organisational theory and management studies, and indeed make our own contributions. But as teachers our concern echoes those of Calvert and Ramsey (1996: 469): 'We are uncomfortable … for much of postmodern language and theory makes knowledge inaccessible to those not sharing our educated space'. Through adopting a semiotic framework, we can facilitate that access.

Furthermore, semiotics can provide the foundation for deconstructing (and therefore denaturalising) theoretical assumptions underpinning organizational theory, and the grand narratives upon which these are built, thus adding a critical edge to the teaching project. We do not suggest that a semiotic framework is the only way to explore these

issues but we believe that it does provide a unifying theoretical base that can encourage richer understanding. It offers a focus for enquiry and a theorisation of meaning making processes that conventional academic disciplines treat as peripheral at best, and often ignore altogether. It enables a mode of analysis for investigating how and why some meanings come to be seen as 'natural and inevitable' in particular cultural contexts, and the practical consequences for different individuals and groups. The conceptual framework, and the methods which it generates, can be used across the full range of signifying practices including, speech, writing, dress codes – indeed all signifying systems (Chandler, 2004), all of which are central to practising effective management and producing effective (and critical) managers.

In addition, semiotics has led to the emphasis within post-structuralism on the reader's role in the meaning making process (Belsey, 2002); this might include management students in the pedagogic context, but also the 'managed' groups in management practice. Surely it is a positive step for managers and prospective managers to understand that texts – linguistic, artefactual, behavioural - can be understood differently, and that meaning making is a plurivocal phenomenon. Understanding that the reader can and will influence how a text is decoded and understood is a valuable management skill. Semiotics provides the theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework to achieve this understanding. Management students (and practitioners) who are exposed to these ideas and methods may be more able to reflect on their own meaning making practices. If they understand that language is not simply representational, but that the world is created through a variety of systems of signification including language, then they have the potential to contemplate and consider their own role in these processes. Without the exposition of meaning making

systems as shared, arbitrary, culturally and contextually mediated, and operating at a largely subconscious level, it is difficult to see how a manager can become reflexive. Understanding the symbolic universe is, we believe, as necessary for management students as 'the acquisition of techniques' (Grey and Mitvek 1995: 74), and understanding the importance of the context in the application of such techniques is facilitated by a semiotic perspective.

Here we find Gidden's notions of practical and discursive consciousness (1979; 1984) pertinent to our argument. Giddens sees practical consciousness as "tacit knowledge that is skilfully applied in the enactment of courses of conduct, but which the actor is not able to formulate discursively" (1979: 57). People's ability to make meaning, and indeed their continuous, highly skilled engagement in such processes is an example of practical consciousness – it is, in Giddens' terms, "what people know how to do" (1979: 73). Practical consciousness is essentially performative, and about one's performance as somehow "natural". This is distinguished from Giddens' concept of "discursive consiousness": "what actors are able to 'talk about' and in what manner or guise they are able to talk about it (1979: 73). In other words, discursive consciousness refers to individuals' ability to reflect on, monitor and give rational accounts of their actions. In terms of semiology and meaning making, discursive consciousness refers to one's awareness of how the meaning making process works, why it can break down and with what implications, and given such rupture, how it comes to be restored or reconfigured. It is about understanding not only the relationship between signified and signifiers, but of the ways in which relations of power and powerlessness are played out in our meaning systems, about how certain meanings come to be accepted as natural and/or inevitable, and about how agreed

understandings can sometimes be challenged or resisted. Interestingly, Giddens suggests that the more fundamental the activity, the harder it is to rationally account for it. So, the fact that meaning making is so routine means that we find it difficult, or strange, to examine the process critically. Also, we would argue that the more basic and routine the activity, the more "obvious" it appears and the less one sees the need for reflexivity. This is precisely why the teaching of semiology is so important. We see the move from practical to discursive consciousness as central to our job as management educators. Understanding how language works in the construction of social and organizational realities is a key managerial skill, and semiotics can nurture the development of this. To deny students of management access to these theoretical ideas simply perpetuates the theory/practice divide so characteristic of management education.

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[i] We are aware that Critical Management Studies can be understood from a variety of positions including Habermasian and Foucaldian, but here we refer to the general aim of denaturalising received, taken-for-granted, invisible assumptions, or the breaking open of 'common' sense ideas.

[ii] We should say here that we take the 'linguistic turn' to include approaches which focus on postmodern and/or poststructuralist ideas on management and organization studies (Alvesson & Karreman 2000), because they appear to share some features, most importantly for us 'a concern for language and representation and a reconsideration of subjectivity and power' (Calas & Smircich, 1999: 649). We remind readers who may wish to challenge our use of structuralist semiotic theories to illuminate poststructuralist texts that 'the history of poststructuralism is the story of the way Saussure's [structuralist] ideas were taken up by later generations' (Belsey, 2002: 10).

[iii] To understand the role of metaphor in organization studies, we need to appreciate that metaphors are 'pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action...[they are] the concepts that govern our thoughts [and] everyday functioning down to the most mundane details' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3). Indeed, Tsoukas (1993: 335) argues that it is 'very probable that the most popular metaphors will be those reflecting dominant ideas and biases of the pertinent social era', and in this sense students can be encouraged to see them as a route to accessing discourses (Tietze and Musson, 2005).

[iv] There are different discourse analytic approaches emanating from different traditions (see for example Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) for speech act theory; Fairclough (1992) for critical discourse analysis; Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks et al. (1974) for conversation analysis; Grice (1957) for pragmatics; Hymes (1974) for ethnography of communication; Hodge and Kress (1988), for social semiotics; Potter and Wetherell (1995) for psychology; Townley (1994) for a Foucaldian approach) and these might be considered mutually exclusive in their philosophical lineage, albeit sometimes similar in practice and scope.

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