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"In Search of Subtlety": Discursive Devices and Rhetorical Competence

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Abstract

What is the role of contradiction in organizational rhetoric? While existing work has tended to focus on contradiction at an *institutional* level, in this paper we propose a distinct but complementary approach by viewing contradictory rhetoric at an *interactional* level and as a *practical* concern, especially when routine is disrupted and repair tactics are required. Drawing on data from a study of a quality improvement initiative in the UK, we examine the contradictions that were constructed as a "change champion" attempted to deal with resistance to change. In conclusion, we suggest that contradiction can emerge as actors reflexively shift their identifications in order to portray themselves and their actions in a contextually appropriate manner.

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Introduction

The so-called "linguistic turn" has placed the study of language at the center of social science, including management and organization studies. Scholars have made significant contributions to the development of management theory by reflecting on language use, such as metaphors and metonymies, and their role in organizational settings (Watson, 1995; Keenoy et al., 2003; Oswick et al. 2002; Putnam, 2004). The seminal work of Kenneth Burke (1950) and later Michael Billig (1996) in particular have been influential in sparking interest in the role of rhetoric in organizations. Rhetoric has been defined as "the conscious development of an inventory of phrases and argumentative devices coupled to a nurtured understanding of human personality and motivation so as to better align an audience towards a specific set of interests without recourse to threat or compulsion." (Holt, 2006, p.9). More simply, Potter & Wetherell (1987, p.187) refer to rhetoric as "the use of discourse to persuasive effect." Cicero distinguished three offices of the orator, namely to teach, inform, instruct; to please; and to move or bend (Burke, 1969, p.73), some containing more positive and others more negative connotations.

For some, rhetoric is something that is distinct from, or even opposite to, action. Cicero observed the distinction between "action and speech, whereby the Sophists would eventually confine rhetoric to the verbal in a sheerly ornamental sense" (Burke, 1969, p.60). In management studies, this position is found in work that contrasts rhetoric "versus" reality (eg. Zbaracki, 1998). Here rhetoric is allocated a peripheral and/or superficial role – as suggested by the phrase "mere rhetoric" – and is assumed to be empty, artificial or ephemeral in nature. In contrast, we follow Burke and Billig and the social constructionist tradition more generally by questioning this dualism between talk and action. Case (1999, p. 422) summarizes Burke's pragmatic approach nicely: "The way we represent the world to ourselves and others will influence the choices we make and the actions we take". Here rhetoric is seen as an important (albeit not the only) form of social action and thus *constitutive* of social reality. Samra-Fredericks (2003) draws on the work of Boden (1994) to illustrate the way in which talk can add "layers" of meaning that over time "laminate" by "shaping" or "producing" beliefs, opinions, values, assumptions, feelings, perceptions, meanings" (p. 152) of organizational members and thereby "socially constructing "organization"/social order" (p. 144).

This successive "layering" of rhetorical moves can have important material outcomes for organizations and their members. For example, Putnam (2004) illustrates the material outcomes shaped by the metonyms and synecdoches used in the pay bargaining process. Similarly, Brimeyer et al (2003) reveal the different rhetorical strategies employed by unions and management in the negotiation of power relations. In a case scrutinized by Smith and Keyton (2001), the careful crafting / scripting of an episode is analyzed as a move in a real behind-the-scenes power struggle. Indeed, recent work on the rhetoric of diversity shows how different discourses of diversity can de-politicize its meaning (Castor, 2005) and reinforce existing power relations by reducing the terms of the debate to those congruent with the economic imperatives of the firm (Zanoni & Janssens, 2003). In short, activities of talking and writing are understood to actively constitute (and re-constitute) organizational reality. Rhetoric is therefore implicated in power struggles and the reproduction and recasting of inequality in organizations. To make clear our positioning within this latter approach we use the term "discourse" in favor of "rhetoric" to highlight the role of talk and text in the construction of organizational reality and the reproduction and re-casting of power relations (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Fairclough, 1993). As Putnam et al. (2005, p.11) point out, a "discourse perspective" is valuable in illuminating "the way in which organizational members enact, reproduce, and make sense of these communicative practices while embracing control and resistance."

Our aim in this article is to contribute to our understanding of the role of rhetoric in the construction of organizational change. In particular, we draw on the Loughborough-based discourse analytic tradition to propose the concept of "discursive devices" and suggest the notion of "*rhetorical competence*" to capture the reflexive aspect of language use in the context of organizational practice. The paper draws on empirical data from a study of a quality improvement initiative in a UK public-private partnership. To illustrate our argument we examine the discursive devices employed by a "change champion" during a training session to introduce staff to the new quality regime. Here we take a broad view of "management" that goes beyond formal hierarchical positions to include the range of actors involved in translating strategic visions into organizational reality. Our analysis highlights the contradiction and paradox that is constructed as a change

agent attempts to adapt to an episode of resistance to the change process. We highlight the function performed by contradiction as the practitioners reflexively oriented towards immediate practical circumstances. Furthermore, we suggest that this contradiction can be understood to *enable* as opposed to *undermine* the change process as the repertoire of discursive devices is subtly shifted during the reflexive praxis of the change agent, thus maintaining the legitimacy of the change across different local contexts.

Discursive Devices, Reflexivity and Rhetorical Competence

From a structurationist viewpoint, a core requirement for theory is to accommodate reflexivity and recursiveness (Giddens, 1984; Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). According to Barley and Tolbert (1997), every "act" needs to be understood as immediately responding to existing conditions whilst, at the same time, modifying, even if only subtly, these conditions. Thus, action must be seen as embedded in the ongoing history of recursive reproduction of an organization. For example, Nelsen and Barley (1997) have demonstrated the recursive role of situationally embedded rhetoric by analysing how a more established group of full-time ambulance personnel employed a "trauma junkies" rhetorical label to contest a less established, part-time, group of volunteers. This study demonstrates how discursive devices, to use our terminology, are not merely "obtrusive, sheer decadent decoration" (Burke, 1969, p.66) but rather have immediate interactional and organizational consequences. We argue that the notion of discursive devices allows us to understand the "dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity" (De Certeau, 1988, p.xiv-xv) of agents as they variously reproduce, reframe and disengage from dominant rhetoric in recursive and reflexive responses to various situations.

In what follows, we will outline the theoretical foundations for our contribution to the understanding of rhetoric, namely the notion of "discursive device", and the creative user of such devices, the reflexive agent. Discursive devices can be defined as "a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 138)[1]. Discursive devices analysis is an "action-oriented" or "performative" approach because it focuses on the actions that people perform with discourse, such as accusing, blaming, praising, justifying etc. Our

inspiration for this approach arises primarily from the Loughborough-based discourse theorists, which have included key thinkers such as Billig, Potter, Edwards and Antaki, among others. The approach of course also draws on speech act theory, which argues that speech acts have performative effects beyond being informative (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979) and develops Wittgenstein's (1958, Para. 7, 11, 14; 1969, Para. 11) frequently used metaphor of language as a toolbox and his thesis that speech happens jointly with activities.

The work of Goffman and Garfinkel is also important for informing the theoretical perspective used in this study. Goffman follows Schutz in viewing a pre-existing background as underlying our sensemaking taking place in specific encounters (1974, Ch.1). Thus, a frame is a sensemaking device to organize our experience (1974, pp.10-11). The appearance of normality provides us with a sense that it is "safe and sound to continue on with the activity at hand with only peripheral attention given to checking up on the stability of the environment" (Goffman, 1971, p.283). This "normality" helps us to save energy, allows routine conduct and averts threats to individual self-respect (Misztal, 2001, p.314). In everyday contexts, people oscillate between being on guard and off guard – they can afford the latter attitude, once they sense that "things are normal" (Goffman, 1971, p.317). Hence there exists a "tendency to interpret new cues within a framework of normal expectations" (Goffman, 1974, p.449). According to Goffman, in these everyday contexts people employ various creative accounts to render abnormalities *unalarming* (Goffman, 1971, p.331). For Goffman (1971, p.26), then, "devices" are the tools that allow social life to go on.

Notwithstanding their theoretical differences, Goffman's thesis on framing resonates closely with the work of Garfinkel on the methods used to construct the social world through everyday talk and action. In his seminal description of Agnes' quest for a female sex status, in spite of her being in possession of testes and penis, Garfinkel (1967, pp.167-172) describes the "passing devices" she employed to secure her female status. Whilst for most members of society routines are employed as an effective way to deal with practical circumstances, for Agnes it was "chronically problematic": much less background could be taken on trust and problems of daily life had to be managed with an unusual degree of deliberateness and calculation (Garfinkel,1967, pp.174-5). What is

important, for our purposes, is the role of devices in facilitating both the smooth flow of interaction and the maintenance of self-identity or "face" (Goffman, 1959). This brings us to the issue of identity – an important concern for our paper.

The work of Kenneth Burke has provided an important contribution to understanding the relationship between rhetoric, identity and identification. Burke (1969) extended the classical literature, which follows Aristotle in focusing on the art of persuasion and appeals to the emotions of the audience, by highlighting the way actors attempt to establish common cause and "identification" with their audience. According to Burke, this is the process through which actors seek to persuade themselves and others that they share important qualities, values and interests, thereby appearing to address the concerns of the audience and be "one of us". Indeed, Cheney (1983) noted how organizations seek to establish a strong common identification amongst employees through communication mechanisms such as company newsletters. Moreover, Burke's approach highlights the role of rhetoric in *constituting* as opposed to *reflecting* patterns of identification. In other words, talk does not express an underlying, fixed identity but rather acts to "work up" some identification that is relevant to the context of the speaker. As such, it makes sense of talk of "identity work" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In fact, an important contribution of the Loughborough discourse analysis school lies in understanding the transience, shifting and contradiction as identification-talk is "varied from moment to moment depending on the participants' interactional goals" (Wetherell, Stiven & Potter, 1987, p.64). For example, Billig (1996, p. 254) argues that rhetorical context affects the expression of attitudes and identification, with contradictions emerging as people switch their expressions, express counter-opinions and "take the side of the other". Here talk is treated as a topic of analysis in its own right as opposed to a resource through which other elements may be studied, such as dominant power/knowledge regimes, attitudes, emotions or beliefs (Potter et al 1990; Potter, 1996; Potter, 2003). The notion of discursive devices therefore enables us to see how actors draw on a portfolio of resources to maintain their self-identity, forge identification with others and respond to "an ever-changing kaleidoscope of situations" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p.156).

Another advantage of the notion of discursive devices lies in its ability to analyze how a "dominant rhetoric" often remains in spite of contestation and contradiction. As Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy (2004, p.637) argue, "regardless of how complete they may appear, discourses, in fact, are always the subject of some degree of struggle …". Indeed, Trowler (2001) used the notion "bilingualism" to capture the way in which managers employ and then drop discourses according to context. Fairclough's (1992, p.148) analysis also identifies significant "contestation and struggle" in discourses regarding the nature of medical practice. Similar findings have led Carter and Mueller (2002) to develop the notion of "bi-furcation" to describe the schisms that emerged between the rhetoric of a group of managerial 'modernizers' and their critics. The notions of "bi-furcation" (Carter & Mueller, 2002) and "bilinguilism" (Trowler, 2001) are important for our purposes for highlighting the existence of paradox and contradiction in organizations. Indeed, the mainstream view of management as a rational activity has been attacked by the so-called 'post-modern turn' in organization studies, with terms such as tension, contradiction, irony, ambiguity and ambivalence now littering the literature (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). Studies have revealed the ambiguity and frustration faced by employees as they deal with paradoxes, such as conflict between a new TQM vision and the established values and power structures of the firm (Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Wendt, 1993), or the demands for 'quality' and 'customer service' with the concomitant pressures to reduce costs and increase the pace of work (Knights & McCabe, 1997).

Recent thinking has also challenged the view that contradiction and paradox are problematic for organizations and hence need to be managed, resolved or overcome (eg. Stohl & Cheney, 2001). In fact, contradiction and paradox has been recognized as a "normal condition" (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004, p. 81) and "routine feature" (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004, p. 81) of organizations and a natural expression of the contradictions and dialectic tensions inherent in organizational life (Putnam, 2004). For example, Fairhurst, Cooren and Cahill (2002) examined how employees dealt with contradictory missions, values and expectations during the implementation of downsizing initiatives, leading to a series of unintended outcomes for the organization and its members. Similarly, for the nurses in the study by McGuire, Dougherty and Atkinson (2006), their role as carers was rendered problematic when the experience of harassment

transformed the dialectic of "closeness" and "distance" into a paradoxical tension. In contrast, Tracy (2004) observed the healthy and productive ways that prison officers dealt with the double-binds inherent in their role, such as respect vs. suspect and nurture vs. discipline. Humor and irony have been found to be common strategies for managing the contradictions that accompany organizational life (Hatch, 1997), for instance as female managers attempt to navigate and mitigate the tensions of gender, status and power (Martin, 2004). More radically, Westenholz (1993) argues that paradoxes provide the conditions for challenging existing frames of reference and enabling organizational change.

A distinct approach to understanding paradox and contradiction has been inspired by work on "interpretive repertoires", which views contradiction as a medium and outcome of practical interactional concerns as actors employ competing and contradictory discourses or "repertoires" in different contexts. For example, Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) seminal study in the sociology of science exposes the contradictions that were created and sustained by the scientists in their study. The scientists employed an "empiricist" repertoire to appeal to their neutrality and objectivity in recording natural phenomena, but switched to a "contingent" repertoire to describe the subjective, political and social factors influencing scientific judgment in other contexts - not surprisingly reserving the former for public texts and the latter for informal conversation, such as lunchtime chatter. Similar contradictions were also observed in Wetherell, Stiven and Potter's (1987) study of equal opportunities discourse, where interviewees drew on 'egalitarian' and 'fairness' repertoires while, paradoxically, restoring and justifying inequality by appealing to the 'biological inevitability' and 'practical necessities' of child rearing.

Following this approach leads us to view contradiction as an outcome of actors responding *reflexively* to the *context* of interaction. Reflexive adaptation to context appears as a recurring theme in work on rhetoric, discourse and communication in organizations. Shotter (1993) refers to "practical-moral settings" in the sense that actors must demonstrate their "fitting" to the practical and moral expectations and rights of a particular context. Katz (1998) describes rhetorical expertise as involving "strategies for invention and organization to respond *appropriately* to the intended audience for an

intended purpose" (p. 422 emphasis added). More recently, Sillince (2006) has highlighted the importance of "salience" in shaping how identities are employed according to particular circumstances and immediate priorities. Taking account of context is therefore important because, as Brimeyer et. al. (2004, p.70) argue, "any analyses of texts, which are isolated from the context, may be incomplete".

This idea that actors adapt their use of discourse to the context implies a capacity for *reflexivity*: the ability to reflect upon the self. Here we follow Tsoukas (2004) in rejecting the notion that reflection stands in opposition to action, suggesting that attention must be turned *away* from immediate practical concerns towards reflection. Rather, we understand reflexivity to constitute the essence of everyday social competence - the "intrinsically human ability to be reflexive - to reflect on one's behavior, as an observer" (Tsoukas 2004, p.173). For example, Loughborough theorists have shown how people form accounts that reflexively attend to possible and actual counter-formulations and attributions of motive or interest (Potter, 1990), which resonates with Cheney's (2000, p. 133) notion of rhetoric as a form of "linguistic shielding". In simple terms, we can observe reflexivity in action by analyzing the linguistic devices that people "build in" to their talk to attempt to shape what others might think, do or say – such as the devices people use to make themselves appear more trustworthy or sympathetic, for example. We thus address Tsoukas' call for " ... more work on how … reflexivity functions, and how context and contingencies influence action paths" (Tsoukas 2004, p.389) by developing the notion of the *creative and reflexive agent*. The latter notion incorporates the importance of the "local geography of contexts and practices" (Potter *et al*., 1990, p.209).

Having outlined our main theoretical tools - namely discursive devices, rhetorical competence and makeshift creativity - we will now describe the methodology employed in the study before moving on to examine the empirical data.

Methodology

Research Site. Back2Work[1] is a public-private partnership that offers employment services contracted from the UK government's Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The services are aimed at helping the long-term unemployed and other "harder-to-help" jobseekers in disadvantaged areas to gain, and maintain, employment. While the company has been known to pay for a jobseeker to have tattoos removed from his face to improve his 'employability', more routinely it provides a range of courses and incentives aimed at increasing jobseekers' chances of securing employment. Since the company was established in 2000, Back2Work has helped more than 65,000 people gain employment, with an average of 70% maintaining employment after a year. The research was conducted across five different office locations and included field visits to the main IT suppliers.

Research Focus. The focus of the research was the roll-out phase of a new "Quality Framework" (QF) information system. The project was initiated as a response to a new contractual regime, introduced by the DWP, which was intended to improve the quality of the data held about jobseekers. Significant financial rewards and contractual penalties were associated with data quality compliance. As the "business sponsor" of the project stated:

> ... there was a wake-up call to us to take a look at quality from a contract compliant perspective ... against the backcloth of increasing contractor requirements, very much around the detail of the delivery, it meant that we run the risk of losing contracts if we didn't act and didn't act fast.

The new quality regime represented a significant change of focus for Back2Work, an organization that had previously prided itself on being "client" focused by striving to

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

minimize bureaucracy, "cut through red tape and take risks" (Back2Work Annual Report 2002). As one senior manager put it:

> They [the DWP] are not only focusing on how many people we're getting into work, but they're focusing on the quality of the data that we export to them and the underpinning paperwork. .... The majority of the people we employ as consultants here, because they work face-to-face with long-term unemployed, the socially-excluded, they tend to be people-people. ... They don't tend to be [thinking] "Oh, I've got to do this bit of paper now".

In short, the new quality focus, embodied in the information system, can be read as an attempt to shift the organization from a "public service" ethos (where employees are people-focused) to a "commercial" ethos (where employees are profit-focused). Focusing on the implementation process thereby enabled us to examine the process through which ideas such as "quality" are embodied in artifacts and embedded in practices.

Data Collection. The study was conducted over a five month period between October 2005 and February 2006. The study took a qualitative approach by seeking to gain an experiential understanding of how the participants made sense of themselves and the world around them (Bryman, 1988; Van Maanen, 1988; Silverman, 1993). Bergström and Knights (2006, p.355) argue that interviews tend to elicit the reproduction of dominant discourses, often without investigating how they affect practice – a point also made by Mueller and Carter (2005, p.241). To address this problem, our methodology sought to go beyond interviews by employing non-participant observation to examine how the quality concept was enacted in members' everyday practices. The aim of the observation was to understand the world-view of the participants while retaining "anthropological strangeness" (Latour & Woolgar, 1986, p.29) and analytical distance from the emic interpretations prevalent in the field. In practice this meant collecting data wherever, whenever and through whatever medium could help throw light on the topic under scrutiny (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), in this case a new quality system. The study

was also inspired by an ethnographic commitment to treating the intimacy and familiarity of the relationship between researcher and researched as a source of insight rather than a problem (Amit, 2000).

The final data-set comprised thirty semi-structured interviews - including three repeat follow-up interviews and four multi-party interviews - with a range of respondents involved in the project (including the project sponsor, the IT team, training personnel, consultants, administrators, jobseekers and external IT suppliers) and non-participant observation at eighteen Quality Framework events (including meetings, training sessions, refresher courses and evaluation sessions). The interviews were tape-recorded and observations that were not tape-recorded (where permission was refused) were written up in field-notes during or shortly after the event. Numerous documents and email exchanges were also collected during the fieldwork.

Data Analysis. Data were analyzed by first transcribing field-notes and tape-recorded interaction (both interviews and observations), then cross-checking the accounts where more than one researcher was present to compile a single record. Analysis of the transcribed data was exploratory, inductive and theory-building in its approach. This involved careful reading and re-reading of the data coupled with an iterative process of moving between the data and existing theoretical literature.

In this paper, we draw on an extract from a digital recording of a one-day user training session, held to introduce members of the administrative staff (now restyled as the "Quality Team") to the new technology. Three key reasons underpinned the selection of this extract. First, the training event provided an opportunity to understand the role of rhetoric in technological change. This is because training events are a critical juncture in the process through which the meaning of an artifact ("what is it?", "what can it do?", "how will it change my working practices?") is discursively negotiated. In Orlikowski's (2000) terms, training represents a transitional point where the "emergent" structures embedded in a new technology are (or are not) transformed into "enacted" practices. Second, the extract was chosen because it is representative of the ambiguity, ambivalence and shifting interpretations that was uncovered during the study. The study found a range

of interpretations of the technology that differed across geographical space, between different organizational functions and over time. Our analysis suggests that this occurred as the Quality Framework system was variously incorporated, appropriated and resisted in relation to members' situated practices.

Third and finally, the extract was chosen because naturally occurring data of this sort is particularly well suited for studying rhetoric in organizations. Data that is recorded in real time offers the advantage of being more complete, accurate and amenable to detailed analysis after the event (Silverman, 1993), thereby increasing the authenticity of the analysis. Unsolicited observational data also offers the advantage of greater levels of validity compared to solicited data such as interviews and focus groups, which suffer from high levels of retrospective reconstruction and prospective accounting – the tendency for narratives produced about events to differ from the events themselves. However, it is important to note that tape-recorded observational data is not "perfect". Problems of inaudible talk, capturing non-verbal interaction and limits to access remain (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Nor is observation data "undistorted" from the effects of researcher influence (as participants reflexively orient themselves to the presence of the researcher(s) and tape-recorder) or researcher interpretation (including decisions about what to transcribe, how to transcribe it and how to analyze the data) (Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Setting the Scene: The Training Event

Conditions at the training session were far from ideal. In the absence of a dedicated training area, the session was held in a small, noisy, open plan office. A room that normally accommodated four workstations had to seat fourteen participants (including two trainers, ten administrative staff and two researchers). A make-shift projection screen had been improvised by sticking large sheets of white paper onto the olive-green walls.

An hour into the training session, things were getting noticeably uncomfortable for the two trainers, Shirley and Becky. The audience had started to vocalize a number of concerns and complaints about the new system. The "change champions" seemed to be facing difficulties in "converting" their audience. The data extract we focus on below

examines a 60-second account produced by Shirley in response to this situation. We start the transcript with a comment by Catherine, one of the Quality Team members in the audience, who expresses her concern about having to do "more work" as a result of the change.

Catherine*: Technically, it's creating more work for us guys, isn't it?*

...

Shirley*: It's all about quality, isn't it, and getting it right first time. ... Hmm. There's bound to be resilience, isn't there. You know, this is not a Shirley and Becky thing. We're just here delivering it. This is not the first time this has come up, because you're sitting there and you're thinking "actually, I'm doing more than, than the consultants are doing, doing more paperwork." But it's all to do with an ongoing audit, isn't it. So that when audit time comes up, you guys will think – hopefully you guys – are the ones that are sitting in doing all the, you know, all the paperwork. I think what – we, we can obviously log down these issues. This is not the first time this has been raised. Am, let me tell you, the smaller locations I've had (inaudible) batches (inaudible) every day and pick them up the following morning. Even the bigger locations like yourselves (inaudible) have got a.m. and p.m. starts. I think I've got to sit on the fence with this one. As I say, I think until you go live – the problem is there's going to be some teething problems in going live, I'll talk to you guys on that – is trying to get some rhythm that's going to work while we've got you guys in. It's going to vary from location to location, but I still take your point. I can understand what you mean there, particularly if it's taking a half an hour to do the ER payments.*

A Discursive Devices Analysis

The analysis that follows examines the discursive practice (what was done with discourse and how it was done) during the 60-second extract. To do this we examine the discursive devices or rhetorical "moves" that appear to be employed.

When reading our interpretation, however, it is important to note the interpretative flexibility around what a particular discursive device "means" or intends to "do". Ours is

only one possible interpretation based on our experiential knowledge of being present at the training event. Indeed, some of the extracts appear under more than one category below because multiple actions can in fact be achieved from a single speech act. It is also important to note that the *employment* of a discursive device is different to its *achievement*, that is, whether it achieves the desired effect on its intended recipients – Austin (1962) distinguishes between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary dimensions to bring out this difference. Discursive devices can of course be challenged, re-appropriated or even ignored. Discursive devices are therefore open to interpretation and deferred in their effects.

Table: Discursive Devices in Action

DISCURSIVE DEVICE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Empathy	Empathy involves attempting to make an action acceptable by showing one's feelings for others; see Fairclough's (1992, p.148) discussion of the genre of "counselling" which includes empathizing in a patient – doctor context.	*"…you're sitting there and you're thinking "actually, I'm doing more than, than the consultants are doing, doing more paperwork.""* "…but I still take your point. I can understand what you mean there."
Disclaimer	Disclaimers are prospective linguistic strategies for deflecting criticism if projected actions backfire and are thus necessarily hypothetical e.g. "If something bad happens, then…" (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975).	*"…there's going to be some teething problems in going live, I'll talk to you guys on that."*
Corroboration	Speakers may "cite others" to shore up their explanations or accounts. Here corroboration is used to signal that the speaker is not skeptical about her audience's concerns by offering extended forms of "acknowledgement tokens". In terms of "framing" (Goffman, 1974), corroborating the audience's interpretation ("it will mean more work") may be an	*"…you're thinking "actually, I'm doing more than, than the consultants are doing, doing more paperwork.""* "…particularly if it's taking a half an hour to do the ER payments."

	attempt to increase the "experiential commensurability" and "narrative fidelity" of Shirley's account (i.e. make her frame resonate with their personal experiences and cultural values).	
Script Formulations	Script formulations occur when participants in conversation describe actions and events as "scripted" (typical or routine) or exceptional". Here it is used as an opposite to "extreme case formulations", to make the situation appear "routine" (see Bourdieu (1992, p.109) on "routinisation") - attempting to make something acceptable by arguing that "there is nothing unusual about this practice", "this kind of stuff happens", "this is just part of the everyday".	*"This is not the first time this has come up."* *"This is not the first time this has been raised."*
Stake Inoculation	"The dilemma is that anything that a person (or group) says or does may be discounted as a product of stake or interest" (Potter, 1996, p.110). Stake inoculation involves denying that stake is relevant or decisive - "I have no stake in this" (Potter, 1996). Stake inoculation also links to the concept of "neutralization", where actors attempt to make something acceptable by externalizing responsibility for it, downplaying the role of certain persons, deflecting from potential blame (Bourdieu, 1992, p.109).	*"You know, this is not a Shirley and Becky thing. We're just here delivering it."*
Hedging	Hedging refers to linguistic strategies that qualify categorical commitment to a particular argument or cause by expressing caution or uncertainty (Hyland, 1996; Meyer, 1997). Here hedging is employed by Shirley to display her uncertainty about the claims made by *both* her (critical and skeptical) audience and the managerially-sanctioned "script"	*"I think I've got to sit on the fence with this one."*

	about quality she is responsible for disseminating – by "hedging her bets" and not "taking sides". This use of "strategic ambiguity" (Faber, 2003) enables her to avoid being seen as unsympathetic but without directly corroborating.	
Stake Confession	Stake confession is an attempt to display honesty and disarm potential criticism by admitting the stake, interest or responsibility one has in the situation: "I have a stake in this" (Potter, 1996). In this case Shirley admits her responsibility for dealing with the "problems" vocalized by her audience and expresses her commitment to acting upon them – that this is "her job".	*"…we can obviously log down these issues."* *"…there's going to be some teething problems in going live, I'll talk to you guys on that"* *"…trying to get some rhythm that's going to work while we've got you guys in."*
Bracketing	Bracketing involves fencing off an activity or event so it does not disturb or disrupt the more general, overall frame (the shared meaning around "what is going on here") (Goffman, 1974). In this case a range of rhetorical moves are made to bracket off the grievances of the audience and thereby protect the overall legitimacy of the "quality" initiative - by portraying the audience's concerns as a) false because of the benefits that can be derived, b) that judgment should be delayed because the concerns may never arise when the system is "live", c) they are merely "teething issues", d) by suggesting there are many possible solutions.	a) *"So that when audit time comes up, you guys will think – hopefully you guys – are the ones that are sitting in doing all the, you know, all the paperwork."* b) *"I think until you go live"* c) *"The problem is there's going to be some teething problems in going live…"* d) *"let me tell you, the smaller locations I've had (inaudible) batches (inaudible) every day and pick them up the following morning. Even the bigger locations like yourselves (inaudible) have got a.m. and p.m. starts."*
Frame Transformation	To transform a frame, old meanings and beliefs have to be discredited for new values to be instilled (Goffman, 1974). In this case the frame "this will mean more work" is recast as "this will	*"So that when audit time comes up, you guys will think – hopefully you guys – are the ones that are sitting in doing all the, you know, all the paperwork."*

	save you work".	
Justification	Justifying involves acknowledging responsibility for the situation, but playing down or dismissing its negative features (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Here Shirley acknowledges her responsibility for dealing with issues after they "go live" but suggests the issues are merely "teething problems" as opposed to major concerns.	*"I think until you go live…"* *"…there's going to be some teething problems in going live, I'll talk to you guys on that"*
Excusing	Excusing involves acknowledging the negative features of the situation, but playing down or dismissing responsibility (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Here Shirley seeks to *externalize* responsibility for the change.	*"You know, this is not a Shirley and Becky thing."*
Reassuring	Reassurance involves the use of discourse to allay doubts and fears, to encourage and hearten, to comfort and soothe. In this case reassuring involves both acknowledgement of responsibility, corroboration and empathy, for instance when Shirley reassures her audience that a) the change could actually benefit them, b) their concerns are being logged, c) there are solutions, d) they will receive support when they "go live".	a) *"So that when audit time comes up, you guys [will not be] … sitting in doing all the, you know, all the paperwork."* b) *"I think what – we, we can obviously log down these issues."* c)*" Am, let me tell you, the smaller locations I've had (inaudible) batches (inaudible) every day and pick them up the following morning. Even the bigger locations like yourselves (inaudible) have got a.m. and p.m. starts."* d) *"I'll talk to you guys on that."*

Analysis

Our discursive devices analysis enables us to highlight the reflexivity, inconsistency and contradiction that accompanied Shirley's social practice. Five instances of contradiction are particularly noticeable in the extract above. First, Shirley's "vocabulary of motives" (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984) seems to mix *justifications* (*"you guys [will not be] … sitting in doing all the, you know, all the paperwork"*) with *excuses* ("*You know, this is not a Shirley and Becky thing*") (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Sillince & Mueller, 2007). Second, Shirley mixed *confession* of her stake or interest in the situation – implying "it is my job to deal with this" when she says "*I'll talk to you guys on that"* - with stake *inoculation* when she implies "this is nothing to do with me" by stating "*This is not a Shirley and Becky thing"*. In the latter claim, she distances herself from the quality initiative by positioning herself as "distanced from the requirements of reality which are best portrayed as unambiguous givens rather than personal wishes and beliefs" (Wetherell, Stiven & Potter, 1987, p.63). Third, this stake inoculation and distancing itself contradicts with the empathy (eg. " *I can understand what you mean*") and corroboration (e.g. "*particularly if it's taking half an hour*") that she performs. Fourth, the use of corroboration (which implies the audience is "right") was also inconsistent with Shirley's attempt to bracket and re-frame the concerns the audience had expressed, implying that the audience's interpretations are either minor or false respectively. Fifth, this corroboration is also contradicted by the hedging she employs just seconds later, where she refuses to corroborate the claims of her audience and prefers to "*sit on the fence*".

What our analysis demonstrates is the dexterity shown by this agent in putting together an overall plausible case that subtly and skillfully blends a number of seemingly inconsistent discursive devices. Our analysis shows that the official quality discourse was indeed one "tactic" used to convince the audience that the change was warranted in spite of the concerns and criticisms expressed by the audience ("*It's all about quality, isn't it, and getting it right first time"*). This is, of course, not surprising given that the "institutional legitimacy" of the technological artifact, the trainers (Shirley and Becky) and the training event all relied upon being sanctioned by management as part of necessary "business imperatives". However, it is noteworthy that the official quality

discourse was only one of *multiple* and *competing* discursive devices used by Shirley to enroll her audience into the change process.

How then does our study contribute to a wider body of literature that seeks to understand the role of contradiction and paradox in organizations? Existing work has tended to focus on contradiction at an *institutional* level, viewing contradiction within everyday discourse (talk and text produced by organizational members) as merely an expression of contradictory organizational strategies, role expectations or institutional pressures (eg. Fairhurst, Cooren & Cahill, 2002; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004; Putnam, 2004). This paper has developed a distinct but complementary approach by increasing the "magnification" of the "research microscope" (Elsbach 2002, pp. 54-55) and viewing contradiction a) at an *interactional* level, and b) as a *practical* concern. Our study suggests that contradiction is a normal feature of organizational interaction as members attempt to deal with situations such as when routine is disrupted and repair tactics are required. Indeed, our study shows how contradictions are constructed as a "change champion" deals with resistance in ways that position her self-identity (see e.g. stake inoculation above), the meaning of the change (see e.g. bracketing and re-framing above) and her identification with the audience (see e.g. empathy and corroboration above) in opposing ways. This, we suggest, serves immediate practical concerns, such as the desire to deflect resistance, avoid a derailing of the change process, save "face" (Goffman, 1959) or perhaps more simply to "get the job done" or "get through the day". Further, we suggest this reflects the *rhetorical competence* of actors as their "interpretive procedures vary in accordance with variations in social context" (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1986, p. 14). Hence contradiction arises from actors "flexibly adjusting …. to their perception of the context and a large variety of interactional and self-presentational goals" (Wetherell, Stiven & Potter, 1990, p. 60). This emphasis on adaptation to context - referred to by Shotter (1993) as "fitting", Katz (1998) as "appropriateness" and Sillince (2006) as "salience" – therefore helps us to develop the notion of the rhetorically competent, creative and reflexive agent.

Summary and Theoretical Implications

In this paper we have argued that the "discursive devices" approach is ideally placed as an approach to understanding rhetorical competence because it draws attention to the practical orientation of discourse - "talk and texts as part of social practices" (Potter, 1996, p.105). In other words, it shows how discourses are used to *do* things, such as explain, excuse, blame, persuade, confess a stake, make the speaker seem trustworthy, authoritative or empathetic etc. It enables the actual operation of discourse-in-practice to be examined by asking "what do people do with discourse and how do they do it?" This is important if discourse is seen as a key component of meaningful social practice, as opposed to simply a transparent information channel (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discourse is potent precisely because it constructs - rather than reflects - events, meanings and identities. Detailed analysis of discourse-in-practice using the discursive devices method is therefore not incompatible with a focus on broader institutional changes (such as the quality initiative in this case) and may even help researchers to understand how organizational regimes are embedded in different local contexts through the situated use of language. For example, Potter (1996, pp.131-2) discusses subtle ways of showing one's disinterestedness. In our case the "change agent" is *subtle in a different way*: some way into her "sales pitch", she recognises that her audience is not "buying it" and she is competent enough to notice this and change her approach.

Our study shows the diversity of the rhetorical "moves" made by a "change champion" in her attempt to frame the situation and position the identities of the speaker and her audience. Our analysis reveals the fast succession of discursive "shifting" that adapted and deviated from (sometimes even undermining or contradicting) the "official" quality discourse. This is valuable because an a priori focus on the official quality template could lend itself to "glossing over" the actual operations of discourse on this occasion. We suggest it is precisely this richness and variation that is likely to be typical of social practice, where practitioners use an array of rhetorical moves to accomplish their work. Discursive devices analysis therefore offers the advantage of taking seriously the subtle movement, variation and contradiction involved in organizational rhetoric. This brings us to the importance of situational ingenuity.

Language use is of course constrained by available signs, power relations and social conventions, meaning that we are not free to pick and choose from an endless "menu" of possible discursive devices (cf Watson, 1995). Notwithstanding, a discursive devices approach does enable us to highlight the improvisation and creativity involved in specific social situations. For instance, the "change champion" in our study was creative in employing discursive devices that attempted to find new angles with which to position her identity, ascribe motives to her audience, "sell" the technology and deal with the "resistance". Rather than merely repeating the official quality discourse - doing this for an hour had clearly not "worked" - the change agent actively adapted and innovated in order to deal with the challenge she faced. Our approach emphasises that rhetoric is situated in the sense that it responds to an *immediate local situation*.

We have operationalized this idea by interrogating an empirical example of discourse-in-practice for the interactional "work" it achieves and the "localized reasons" it might have (Shotter, 2005, p.115). For instance, the discursive devices employed by the "change champion" attempted to "salvage" *the situation* by overcoming the "resistance" she faced. Indeed, it is plausible to suggest that a different set of complaints (such as "Doesn't this mean *less* work for us? Won't that mean job cuts?") would have invoked a different set of devices. Similarly, a different audience (such as senior management) would also have been likely to invoke a different set of devices. Hence we have highlighted how competent agents display awareness of and reference to an *existing history*. Our main theoretical contribution, therefore, is the notion of the competent and creative agent who can assemble various ingredients to respond to the immediate task-in-hand.

What then are the broader theoretical implications? First, we have developed the insights of Burke on rhetoric and identification by revealing the contradictory identifications employed as actors seek to "portray their actions and beliefs in *contextually appropriate ways*" (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1986, p. 14, emphasis added). For example, the change agent in our study sought to identify with her audience (eg. by empathizing with her audience and corroborating their claims), while at the same time distancing from, down-playing and dismissing their concerns and complaints (eg. by hedging, externalizing responsibility etc) in order to fulfill her task as "change champion"

responsible for countering and pacifying resistance. Hence we have put forward a framework for understanding contradictory identifications in rhetoric that develops and extends the notion of "strategic ambiguity" (Faber, 2003). Existing literature has examined the role of metaphor, polysemy and humor (Oswick et al. 2002), for example when actors use jokes, irony or words that mean two things. Further, we highlight the contradictory identifications that arise from complex and conflicting interactional concerns, such as the need to counter employee resistance and "keep the show on the road", without seeming insensitive and unsympathetic, while simultaneously also representing managerial interests. In our case, contradiction seemed somewhat inevitable because identification with the audience had to be coupled with the need for the speaker's identity to remain different, in order for the audience to recognize the legitimacy of the change in spite of their misgivings.

Second, our analysis also offers contributions to the understanding of processes of institutionalization. It is noteworthy that some of the discursive devices appeared to *undermine* the official quality discourse, for instance by placing the self-interest of the audience above the business interests represented by the quality initiative (eg. by implying it will reduce the workload of the audience), or by representing the supposed "champions" as less than committed to the discourse (eg. by implying it was not their idea). However, we have shown how the discursive devices employed by the change agent were aimed at establishing the *legitimacy* of the quality initiative and *enabling* the process of institutionalization (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) – whereby actors come to establish new norms and "shared definitions of reality" (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004, p.635). In fact, the tactical improvisation and strategic shifting we observed may have actually kept the conditions of possibility open for the official quality initiative *in spite of* (or, more radically, even *because of*) the many other discursive devices employed by the change agent. Indeed, reproducing the managerially sanctioned "sales pitch" on its own had clearly *not* succeeded in establishing the legitimacy of the quality initiative, given the complaints that had provoked the account we analyze. Hence, continuing to reproduce the official quality discourse would have limited the ability of the change champion to salvage the situation, get the audience "on board" with the change process and maintain a positive identity for herself.

These findings run contra to Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy's (2004) proposition that discourses that are "more coherent and structured" and "not highly contested by competing discourses" are more likely to facilitate the process of institutionalization. In fact, our study found that the adaptation, deviation, distancing and re-framing of the official "quality" discourse *enabled* the initiative to gain legitimacy in the training event in question. Our findings therefore suggest that the legitimacy of a template is not inherent in the template itself but rather has to be constructed, negotiated and achieved. We argue that the subtle, reflexive and situationally competent use of discursive devices plays an important role in this process.

<u>Notes</u>

1. We depart from the term 'interpretative repertoires' used by Potter and colleagues because we draw on a range of analytical concepts from other discourse and rhetoric theorists.

2. All names are pseudonyms.

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