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When Silence is not so Golden: On the Lack of Dialogue Between Linguistics and Management Studies

It is now received wisdom that the social sciences have undergone a “linguistic turn” (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, Deetz 2003, Musson, Cohen & Tietze 2007), and a commonplace that at least 80% of a manager’s working time is spent communicating (Whetten & Cameron 1991, 230). Strange, then, that linguistics tends to be conspicuous by its absence in management studies – not to mention managerial practice. For, notable exceptions notwithstanding, the overall picture remains one of peaceful but detached co-existence of the two disciplines. One cannot help wondering why this is so. After all, if language is so central to organizational life and managerial activity, why has it not been recognized more widely that linguists have highly specialized expertise to offer in that area? Conversely, how come relatively few linguists focus on research questions related to the economy, business and management?

The aim of my talk is to try and answer these questions and to assess the consequences of the two disciplines’ mutual detachment on the institutional and individual levels. As one specific example, I will show how academic textbooks on Organizational Behaviour (OB) – best-selling, high-impact titles used in mainstream management teaching around the world – deal with language, discourse and communication. The evidence suggests very strongly that contemporary linguistics has had little to no impact among OB scholars. If the textbooks investigated touch upon language at all, they do so in a rather cursory and in some cases even clichéd manner, and there is no mention of the specific contribution that linguistics could make to the theory and practice of management.

Deploring this state of affairs is not merely a question of hurt pride. More pertinently, on both sides of the disciplinary divide, the relatively low visibility of linguistics means losing opportunities for applied and socially engaged research as well as for the development of mixed methods (not to mention missing out on new funding streams). At the same time, it has implications for personal career paths, particularly for young linguists who are in the process of finding their bearings in an increasingly competitive academic world.

The lack of dialogue between linguistics and management studies generally is bad enough, but it seems particularly worrying in the area of organizational discourse, which should after all be our home turf. Even there, as the study of OB textbooks has shown, we have lost territory to other disciplines, most notably sociology and psychology. It is high time we regained the territory lost, or, better still, staked out new claims.

References:

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