Antecedents

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The Language of Power and the Power of Language
Stewart R. Clegg

Introduction

There are a number of distinct approaches to the analysis of organizational language. Within the literature, one of these, the study of construction sites reported in Clegg (1975), differs from two predominant approaches in its 'materialist' concern for its topic (Bhaskar 1985 is an excellent discussion of 'materialism'). From the perspective it takes, the analysis of language need neither be a means of displaying a technical competence on the part of both analyst and speaker, nor be regarded as the authenticating frame of an ethnographic study. While the former typifies 'conversational analysis' concerns in ethnomethodology, (to which Heritage 1984: 232–292, provides an excellent introduction) the latter is often practiced by researchers with a concern for verisimilitude, such as Nicholls and Beynon (1977). For the former, the focus on language-use is frequently an end in itself in order to research those pervasive mechanisms through which much of the everyday work of conversation takes place (e.g. Sacks 1972; Schegloff 1968). Whereas in the ethnographic approach language is more or less transparent: it reveals a reality outside itself to which it refers. For the conversation analyst, following on from Garfinkel (1967), language primarily reveals the order contained within its use. While the ethnographers address language-use as a mirror to social reality, the conversation analysts may often be said to regard it as social reality *per se.* By contrast to both these approaches, an alternative, materialist approach, addresses the use of language as one of the important media for and

outcomes of the accomplishment of both social structure and social action. It addresses the 'material word' in the 'material world' of work, where much of this work is done in and through the organization-specific production of language: and this language is a language of power.

Power, as a form of social action, requires to be analysed through its action in the maintenance, negotiation and reproduction of social structures premised on specific forms of 'domination'. Social structures are linked to power by contextually specific 'modes of rationality' through which power is accomplished and domination reproduced. The reproduction of domination depends not on which actor or actors 'win' power battles on any specific occasion, but on the hegemonic effect of these battles being fought within an arena of contextually united 'vocabularies', and 'grammars' of motives and moves (Clegg 1975).

Conceived in this way, the analysis of language-use in organizations can address the major analytical problem in the study of power. After Dahl's (1969) definition of power as an A getting a B to do something that B would not otherwise have done, subsequent debate centred on the questions raised by Bachrach and Baratz (1962; 1970) on non-decision-making and non-issues. At its core was the concern to distinguish a 'false' consensus on, for instance, goals or values, from one which was 'genuine'. This approach necessarily makes power a discursive phenomena but treats its as neither transparent nor self sufficient but as a materially structured reality. Language and its socially available categories of rational action pre-structure the field of power, while not determining its outcomes.

Language Analysis and Power

Irrespective of the approach, if power is to be conceived discursively, in and through language, for organization analysis, then some limitations of its specifically *organizational* location, in naturally occurring conversations, must be noted.

First, there are some practical problems which are particularly acute on outdoor building construction sites, the research setting in this case. Construction sites are very noisy, very dangerous, very mobile settings in which people are rarely stationary. It is actually physically very difficult, without extremely sophisticated bugging equipment (which in any case is not to be recommended on ethical grounds), to taperecord naturally occurring conversations in such a work setting, at least out on the site itself. In fact, in almost every organization of significant size, it will prove difficult to gain access to its inner sanctums and circles. As is well known, it is far easier to gain access to the relatively less powerful than the relatively more powerful. These constraints meant that the data collection had to be done in a site office rather than outdoors and in the site organization rather than elsewhere,

such as in the borough corporation or the contractor's head office. These constraints were hardly noticed at the time.

When I started to do my research I had a small portable taperecorder about the size of an average book, maybe a little bit bigger, which had a built-in microphone. I had permission to use the machine but I did not want to make it too conspicuous. I sat in the corner of a room measuring about 8 metres long by about 4 metres wide at a desk with a lot of building materials and documents piled up on it. I looked much like any other building worker around the office. Most of the time I appeared to be 'part of the furniture'. But I had the tape recorder going. This was another, self-imposed, constraint on research location, since once I had chosen to tape my data then I had to find a locale in which the technology would function efficiently.

The room was actually the project manager's office, one in which there was considerable traffic, and it was also, by chance, the place in which site meetings were held. These meetings became my major source of data. Not entirely, because I did use other kinds of data as well, but the site meetings were particularly important.

Much more important than these practical problems, however, are some analytical ones. To what extent is access to the reality of power and organizations possible through the analysis of language? Conversational analysis would suggest that one would be able to reach this reality through studying phenomena such as taking turns, closures, interruptions, and the formulating of the various kinds of rules which structure the form of whatever content is being expressed (Schegloff 1968; Sacks 1972, would be some key reference here). Take, for instance, this data in which there is a discussion between two people, PW and Ray.

P.W.   I'm going to write a letter, you know, item by item, what I've got Ken (Assistant Measurement Engineer) doing at the moment, I roughed it out on there, an enlarged vertical scale, so you can see what you're talking about, a section through the site of each grid line/

Ray   Yeah/

P.W.   with the basements plotted in, and the ground levels as known/

Ray   Yeah/

P.W.   and then plot in our bases, and soon as you do that you start seeing that, we haven't gone down deep as they're saying, eh, if you look at the picture I drew yesterday, said he, said he (searching) . . . this hole here, this inspector's office base, that they looked at the clay, we took a check all around it yesterday, and in fact, just around the one hole.

Ray   Yeah/

P.W.   that sandy clay was up and down anything/

Ray   Yeah/

P.W.   up to

Ray   Yeah/

> P. W.   six hundred mills around it, so we take the average, ninety eight one
> five-0.
> Ray   Yeah/
> P. W.   take the six hundred and ten that we've got to go into it, gives us an
> average level of ninety seven five forty/
> Ray   Yeah.

So far, Ray's contribution to the conversation has been 'yeah'. He does impro-vise further on in the conversation, he says 'aye' and right towards the end of the conversation he makes one or two actual interlocutions. One can ask who is exercising power there? Clear PW is, over Ray. But once we know that PW is the project manager and that Ray is the site foreman, we do not really need to make reference to a linguistic text to discover, in a circumlocutive way, what is already quite evident.

That seems to me to be a major problem with the analysis of turn-taking and with the formal ethnomethodological analysis of conversation for researching authoritatively structured settings. It may not add sufficiently to what can be readily recognized by other means.

Power and Practical Reasoning: The 'Inclemency Rule'

Let me introduce a more materialist perspective, again by way of a datum which I call the 'inclemency rule'. On construction sites, at least in the U.K., joiners (or 'carpenters' as they are perhaps more usually called) have as part of their contract the statement that they shall not work in 'inclement weather' (that is, harsh or unpleasant weather). Now, that sounds fine, of course, but clearly there is no operational definition as to how bad the weather has to be for it to constitute inclemency; something I learnt in an interesting and round-about way when I was working as a labourer on site. One day we were out on site and the gangerman (the man nominated as the work units 'leader') said, 'ay up lads, (h)'appen it's coming on a bit inclement', holding up his finger to the wind as he said so. We looked up and stopped and looked around and said, 'aye (h)'appen it is'. We downed tools and went back to the hut where we started a game of cards and brewed up some tea. After about ten minutes or so the site foreman came down and said, 'What you buggers doing, you should be out on site'. The gangerman responded, 'joiners don't work in inclement weather hey, its come on inclement'. The foreman went away and got the project manager who came down about ten or fifteen minutes later. A verbal altercation followed, there was some degree of negotiation and eventually we sheepishly went outside on site. It was drizzling slightly. Now the first time this happened I did not think much of it, I did not ask anything about it, I just thought, OK, I know joiners don't like getting wet and we don't work when its raining. But it happened again two or three days later. I began to wonder what was going on, because this time it was hardly raining at all.

With a wink and sly look the gangerman said, 'Hey up, seems like it's a bit inclement lads' and we trooped off. This went on several times over a period of two or three weeks.

What I believe was actually happening was the following. The job was organized in such a way that the joiners were making a very poor bonus. A joiner's wage packet was made up in several ways; they received an attendance allowance, and money for being there which included a cost for travelling to work, on top of a standard flat rate wage, but the bulk of the extra was made up of a piece-rate group bonus which depended upon the amount of shutterage (the framework constructed for concrete to be poured into) that the joiners could make per metre over a period of time.

What the joiners were actually doing was to use the inclemency rule in an ironical but quasi-legitimate way. Pressure was being put upon an incompetent management to organize the job more efficiently so that materials and supplies came on site on time. If these had been on time the joiners could have worked more so that they would have earned more bonus. Since supplies were not arriving, they took up the consequent slack time for 'inclemency'.

In power terms the 'inclemency rule' is really quite interesting. Writers like Burawoy (1979) have talked about the games that workers play in organizations as a way of making out and creating space outside managerial surveillance. The joiners, while playing similar kinds of games, were doing so not to make out and create space outside managerial control, but to put pressure on the management to increase control and thus more efficiently exploit them. That is a very strong kind of power. It is one in which subjects happily collude in intensifying their own subjection. What it points to is that the kind of power being exercised there was not discursive despite the fact that it was approached through a discursive analysis. Instead, the questions of power in that situation were tied up with systems of wage relations, of the social relations of production (cf. Abercrombie et al. 1980). Power there was not a discursive phenomenon.

One can point to discursive instances of power on the site such as a foreman issuing orders (in a more developed version of Wittgenstein's (1969) example of the labourer and builder at the beginning of the *Blue and Brown Books*). While these certainly are a form of power they are not the most significant. This is not how power is normally accomplished. The usual way is by manipulating the structure of, for example, wage-payment systems, which are non-discursive phenomena, and via traditional occupational practices.

Power and Issues

What I was interested in initially, was power as it is normally constituted. That was basically the Dahlian 'A getting B to do something that B wouldn't otherwise do' model. But it became apparent not only from theory but also

from observation in the construction-site setting that one really did not get much purchase on the reality of power and organization by just going and watching people doing things. The most important kinds of power were already constituted as being those occasions when A's didn't have to get B's to do things because B's would do those sorts of things anyway. Simple empiricism would not be sufficient to reveal this.

One of the possible ways in which one might begin to formulate this concern was to look at those things which arose as issues over which power might be exercised. Originally, in *Power Rule and Domination*, this was called a deep structure rather than a surface structure. It suggested that issues were generative of the exercise of power, having an underlying rationality. The issues were not merely contingent.

It is interesting, in fact, that three social researchers in the U.K., within three years of each other, published books which had in them an essentially similar argument on the relationship of structure, action and power. At the end of 1974. Lukes published his book on *Power: A Radical View* with a three dimensional model: in 1975 I published *Power, Rule and Domination*, the three dimensional model again, and then in 1976 Giddens published *New Rules of Sociological Method*, with his model of power, facility and domination. Clearly all three had been reading similar texts and coming to similar conclusions. I certainly had no contact with Lukes and Giddens, and I don't know if Lukes and Giddens were in contact with each other at all. It is one of those interesting pieces of scientific serendipity.

With respect to the empirical setting, what became very clear over a period of some weeks was the way in which the issues that were occurring for contestation and conflict, the issues over which the A-B type power plays were being exercised, were not wholly random, unrelated, independent or contingent phenomenon. They had a rationality which inhered within the basic framework of the construction site.

A construction site is not a single organization but is a complex play of interorganizational relations. There is the contractor's organization; the client organization which, in this case, was the borough corporation of a northern English town; there were the suppliers; the sub-contractors; the tradesmen; the local police (who would be there to handle disruptions to traffic flow, for example); demolition firms, and many more. What was important in understanding this very complex pattern of interorganizational relationships was that it was constituted by a single discourse, a single text. This text was the contractual document, the bill of works, the document upon which the competitive tender had been legally made for the construction contract.

In the formal literature of architectural practice, for instance, in the *Royal Institute of British Architects Handbook* can be found the injunction: 'The system requires that before bills of quantities are prepared full working drawings shall be completed.' After this instruction, in heavy type comes the warning 'that any future change in location, size, shape or cost after this time will

result in abortive work'. According to the *Royal Institute of British Architects Handbook*, these drawings will embody final decisions upon every matter related to design specification, construction and cost and full design of every part and component of the building.

The *RIBA* account seemed inapplicable in the letter of the text, in practice. Such a formal representation does not account for the document's inherent indexicality. Documents must be read and interpreted if they are to be used. To say that they are indexical simply means that their sense is not evident, there is no notional meaning, no one correct sense which inheres in them. They can only be read in terms of their meaning as constituted by particular actions in particular contexts.

From the limited observation of construction sites by organization researchers, one of the most interesting findings is that they are invariably characterised by very high degrees of conflict and high degrees of ambiguity, often concerning the contract itself. In the organizations theory literature this has often been seen in terms of notions of uncertainty, where the uncertainty has been seen as a contingency, sometimes even one which is climatically based. For instance, rain or snow may be seen as a climatic variation which introduces uncertainty. This is a comparatively insular view of the world given the range of climatic variations within which construction sites routinely occur. A more sophisticated view of contingency is required.

In a situation in which the contractual documents supposedly specify every variable in the building process, then the normal mode of rationality, particularly for the contracting company, is to try and negotiate or renegotiate the contract itself. The contract is the only variable which is not specified by the contract. The kinds of issues that were emerging for the exercise of power in particular pieces of power play were themselves characterized by an underlying mode of rationality.

Very often construction companies will tender for a contract in order to keep plant, machinery, and employees who were a stable part of the core labour force, employed. Often they would do so where the contribution to profit might be very low, or where it might even be negative, on a job which was losing money. One of the reasons for doing this is because there is always the possibility of exploiting the indexicality of the contractual documents so as to renegotiate them more favourably at any occasion that occurs. What emerges from the construction site materials is an exquisite temporality.

This particular construction site could be constituted in terms of events before normal clay and events after normal clay. Normal clay became a kind of bench mark issue around which all the other issues came to be collected. I had better explain what normal clay was. The documents contained instructions to excavate three metres into clay, and they also contained, elsewhere, similar instructions about excavating into sandy stony clay. The possibility, of course, is that three metres into clay and into sandy stony clay do not represent the same amount of work. The construction company's argument was that

they did not, which was why, regrettably, when the clerk of works was not present, they had to excavate extra soil for which they expected payment of £8000 for the extra work involved. That became the issue around which all the subsequent issues began to emerge. On the one side, the construction company was attempting to exploit systematically any forms of equivocality which they could indexically constitute out of the documents. On the other side, the architect representing the corporation was attempting to preserve the integrity of the design and of the contractual relationships at all costs. The participants in this became the project manager of the construction company, the client organization, and various sub-contractors.

Discussion

One of the things which became apparent from this empirical work was that if power is involved in actual decision-making, then one of the problems with the social world is that it is rather like Jean-Luc Godard's view of cinema. Films may have beginnings, middles and ends but they are not necessarily found in that order. Most of the time one only sees middles, one rarely sees beginnings and ends are not always what they seem to be. It is quite difficult to constitute actual beginnings and very difficult to constitute closure, because episodes often move out of one arena and into another. Rather than being located in decision-making, power was to be found much more, I then felt, in the play of the discourse itself, in the way in which the available categories for talk in particular contexts were lodged within a mode of rationality, constituted within a particular form of life, of domination, as was argued at the time.

Let me now identify one or two obvious problems with the analysis which became subsequently apparent. It appeared that I had a very useful way of handling conversational materials in which issueable matters were discussed, but quite particular constraints attached to the use of this conversational material. What can be collected is organizationally skewed, as I have suggested. In an effort to surmount this drawback, I later began to think of some alternative way of formulating the theoretical structure of the analysis, particularly the level of mediation, the mode of rationality. From my recollection of the use made of the inclemency rule I came to realise that what one might do was to look at the various modes whereby the elements in an organization's labour force are established under differential regimes of discipline, through different labour markets, and through various managerial practices. From this I constructed an ideal typical model (Clegg 1981). In retrospect, this was still highly problematic. This 'second stab' still attempted to retain a commitment to a level of ultimate determination, one which in the earliest work had been an implicit Marxism and which later became much more explicit (Clegg 1979). One may make structural analyses from, as Lukes (1974) would put it, the first dimension to the second dimension of

power, but it may well be mistaken to seek to centre such an analysis in an essentialist or totalising way at any one ultimate level of determination. For one thing, to do that demands a certain kind of Weberian desire on the part of the theorist to only elect to see that which one's particular set of values elect one to see. Whereas I saw 'capitalism' others might well have wanted to see quite other things.

Analytically, one needs to move in a full circle in analysing power and language in order to focus on not only the language of power but also on the power of the language of power. Part of the problem with power actually resides in the 'problem of power' itself, elaborated from a certain view of power as foundational, as a premise from which subsequent debate developed. In contrast to some other writers, one might want to suggest that it is not really possible to take the simple A–B notion of power as a foundation upon which to build a second and a third dimension (in which the latter usually ends up being an analysis in terms of an ideological illusion, implicit or explicit to notions of hegemony in a more or less Gramscian mode). Such an argument, in Lukes (1974) for instance, seeks to analytically build 'structure' on the foundations of 'action'. While one critique of this might instead reverse the direction of construction, as for instance Clegg (1979), what is at issue is not the status of the correct one-way direction of determination but the decision as to how structure is to be conceived at all as both a determining and determined instance of power, or perhaps not be adequately conceived at all.

The initial problematic of power constrained the way in which the subsequent debate could develop. Only a certain kind of space, only a certain kind of play for innovation in that debate was available. What Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Lukes (1974) and others were doing was running up against the limits of the language within which that conceptualization of power was itself formulated. If the injunction of Wittgenstein (1968) to study the meaning in use is ordinarily represented as cross-sectional, perhaps through the influence of ordinary language philosophy, another way in which one might look at it would be to think of it as an historical injunction. Consequently, one can look at the development of an intellectual discourse about power as something which has developed, perhaps rather like a Foucauldian archaeology, from a causal, mechanistic and individualistic conceptualization in its genesis from Hobbes to the present day. The problem of 'the problem of power' could then be related to that initial conceptualization of power as if it were something which was wholly causal, mechanistic, and individualistic. The language game extending this discourse of power, one could argue, has thus become condemned to tracing the limits and frame of an originary discourse (Clegg 1979).

It is at this point where some recent work on power has come to rest. One way it might go further would be to develop Foucault (1977) on power discourse analysis, although one remains to be convinced by Foucault's analysis of power. In moving away from the essentialism and centering of power implicit in any undialectical conception of structure as only a determining

and not itself a determined instance (let alone one in which it is invoked as both a determining and a determined instance of the exercise of power), it is very easy to fall back into the kind of pluralism with which Dahl began thirty years ago. Without some *a priori* privilege being awarded to a theoretical essence (for example, 'class', 'élite', 'patriarchy') which orchestrates the arena of power, it is hard to see how power studies can escape being pluralist. Equally, it is difficult to see quite how such theoretical privilege might be justifiable outside 'ultimate values'. Should we then call for an applied plurality of those in a routine way? Perhaps, after all, this is the sociological fate of our disenchanted times?

Note

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