The ‘Voices of Silence’: Conversations on Language, Meaning-Making and Organizational Theorizing

John Shotter
Department of Communication
University of New Hampshire.
Durham, NH 03824
(603) 862 3035
jds@hypatia.unh.edu

Ann L. Cunliffe
Department of Public Administration
California State University, Hayward
Hayward, CA 94542
(510) 885 2268
acunliff@csuhayward.edu

Abstract

We begin with the premise that meaning-making is not an individual conceptual activity but a dialogical one, taking place between people, occurring in both everyday and specialized speech genres. In our presentation, we will examine the conceptual roots of these ideas, particularly the interplay between the given and the new, the regular and the unique, to explore the implications and possibilities of first-time creativity for organizational theorizing. Our approach draws on both postmodern and social constructionist sensibilities following the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty, the literary ideas of Bakhtin and Voloshinov, and from Shotter’s notion of the relationally-responsive nature of lived experience. We use the term meaning-making to suggest that making sense of our world is an ongoing activity in which meaning-making does not draw on already fixed or predetermined categories or conventions, but is crafted between us in our talk, in response to unique events in our unique surroundings. One issue of debate between us is the role of poststructuralist notions of the instability of language, and we hope to bring this into the conversation.

Postmodern and phenomenological critiques have rejected the modernist focus on already existing external referents or underlying structures (as suggested by Structuralists) as ordering and explaining human existence and meaning. Neither can we step outside language and experience, as disinterested spectators, to explain what is going on. Indeed, as Voloshinov (1986) puts it: “It is not experience that organizes expression. but the other way around - expression organizes experience. Expression is what first gives experience its form and specificity of direction” (p.85). But how is this possible? Because as Voloshinov (1986) continues “… word is
a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addressee and addressee... A word is territory shared by both addressee and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor... social interrelationships constitute the atmosphere in which an utterance is formed. The immediate social situation and the broader social milieu wholly determine - and determine from within, so to speak - the structure of an utterance” (p.86). Thus an explicit utterance, in its speaking, is ‘shaped in its movement by the ‘invisible’ milieu in which it is uttered.

In Signs (1964), Merleau-Ponty talks about the ‘Voices of Silence’ suggesting that language itself is partly silence because it does not directly voice an original ‘thing’. Instead, language is allusive and indirect, claiming that meaning lies in the movement of speech, the articulation, silences, gestures, and embodied responses generated by situated language use. It has its meaning in its responsive gesturing (both indicative and mimetic) in relation to the invisible milieu in which it is uttered. For him, meaning lies in the gaps and tensions between words, by what is said and left unsaid, by speakers and listeners, and in the “background of silence which does not cease to surround it and without which it would say nothing.” (p. 46) It is in this total movement that we make meaning between us.

We suggest that this total movement has an intersubjective nature: as living beings, we cannot not be responsive both to the others around us and to other aspects [othernesses] of our surroundings. We are embedded in a ceaseless stream of spontaneously responsive, living, bodily activity which intrinsically relates us to them whether we like it or not. This stream of relationally-responsive activity is filled with words and silences in the sense that:

- Activities in this sphere lack specificity and are only partially formed.
- This makes it very difficult for us to characterize their nature: they have neither a fully orderly nor a fully disorderly structure, neither a completely stable nor an easily changed organization, neither a fully subjective nor fully objective character.
- They are also non-locatable - they are ‘spread out’ or ‘distributed’ in an unarticulated space between participants.
- The overall outcome of any exchange cannot be traced back to the intentions of any of the individuals involved, the ‘dialogical reality or space’ constructed between them is experienced as an ‘external reality’ or a ‘third agency’ with its own ethical demands and requirements.
- Wittgenstein (1980) talks of such responsive events as providing “the origin and primitive form of the language game,” (p.31). And adds: “But what is the word ‘primitive’ meant to say here? Presumably that this sort of behavior is pre-linguistic; that a language-game is based on it, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought” (1981, no.541).
- In other words, in this kind of allusive, indirect, expressive responsive activity, we express unique and first-time meanings in unique circumstances – meaning relevant to the particular circumstances we currently occupy.
This focus on allusive, indirect, but dialogically structured forms of expression, thus offers very different possibilities for researching and theorizing organizational life from those situated in modernist thought.

**Researching Organizations**

From our postmodern/social constructionist sensibility, organizations are not seen as structures, but as ‘landscapes’ of socially-maintained features, providing a common sense (an ethical sensibility) of organizational life. This landscape emerges within relationally-responsive dialogue between organizational participants.

The implications of these ideas for conceptualizing organizational interactions are profound. They suggest that organizational design, elements of organization such as control and power, and the activity of managing, can best be understood by exploring the small, unique details of our everyday linguistic practices. Instead of rational, objective, and already-formed entities, we have linguistic, intersubjective, and emerging language communities. They lead to a focus on previously unnoticed unique and unrepeatable events rather than on regularities.

If, as we suggest, meaning emerges as people coordinate activities within embodied language communities, the implications for our methods of inquiry are significant. Research becomes an interplay of voices as both researcher and other participants jointly create meaning. This intersubjective constitution of meaning may be a complex ebb and flow of connecting/disconnecting, dialogue with self/others, listening, feeling… -- a responsive process of meaning-making occurring in the silences/voices in our relationally-engaged embodied activities. We need methods or practices that explore the taken-for-granted and responsive nature of our interaction as members of different language communities.

Our own research practice centers around social poetics, which embraces the notion that language is metaphorical, meaning-making is an embodied practice, and an indeterminate, allusive process. If we accept that meaning-making occurs as words, silences, sounds, rhythm, gestures, and emotions play through us, then we need to explore from within research conversations, how we jointly create meaning with others. This means being sensitive to the different voices, different language communities and their conventions, and recognizing that we (as researchers) are situated in the process of meaning-making.

**Theorizing Organizations**

Theorizing is most often seen as invoking secondary speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986), relatively stable and specific forms of voice found typically in commentaries and in 'scientific' research and writing. However, Bakhtin suggests these secondary speech genres "lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others" (p. 62). If we situate theorizing as meaning-making, then it becomes not just a conceptual activity, externally imposed on a practice, but a dialogical one taking place within primary speech genres: in unmediated speech communication or everyday dialogue. Instead of silencing the voice of the Other, we bring these voices into the research conversation by recognizing that each language community has its own conventions of
meaning-making and theorizing. These ‘practical theories’ (Shotter, 1993), normally silenced by the linguistic conventions of academic communities, are brought to the fore.

References


