Perspectives on Language, Accountability and Critical Accounting: An Interpretative Perspective

This paper explores the utility of Habermas’s *A Theory of Communicative Action* (volumes 1 and 2) and his *Between Facts and Norms*. Habermas’s work has influenced middle-range accounting as advanced by some critical accounting researchers writing about critical and public sector accountability models. This paper considers accounting’s role in the public sphere and examines the Habermasian strain running through critical accounting. A different linguistic model is introduced which adapts H. G. Gadamer’s and Charles Taylor’s work on language and how it creates different ways to think about the world. The aim of the paper is to examine whether it is possible to escape the instrumental limitations of accounting.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, critical accounting theory [CATS] has been influenced by an applied linguistic model that adapts Jurgen Habermas’s work (see Laughlin, 1987; Power and Laughlin, 1996; Broadbent, *et. al.*, 2001). This paper proposes a different language theory to that expounded by Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (vol. 1, 1984; vol. 2, 1987) and *Between Facts and Norms* (1996). The theory proposed is applied to accountability research to examine the role of accounting and language. The accountability model that is offered is aligned with the disclosing potential of communication and language to escape the procedural problems that have been identified in accounting (see Cousins, *et. al.*, 2000, 2001; Gray, 2002; Humphrey and Owen, 2000).

Critical accountants have utilised Habermas’s language and communication model to adjudicate between different validity claims such as those that abound in the

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2 Norman McIntosh (1997) has labelled dominant accounting perspectives in the following manner: CATS (Critical Accounting Theory), RATS (Rational Accounting Theory), EARS (Ethnographic Accounting Research).
context of accounting. Habermas offers a formal language model to adjudicate between these validity claims. The argument in the paper is that Habermas’s important insights into the colonising and alienating impacts of modern society can be extended. This is because it is questionable whether democratic and accountability issues can be explained solely through procedural and formal language models as Habermas maintains.

The paper offers a different perspective concerning the role that language plays in society. It involves the art of interpretation which connects with those accountability factors that renew and develop through conversation and dialogue (see Taylor, 1991). The framework in this paper maintains that the language of accounting is curtailed by formal and procedural rules (see Taylor, 1991, 2003). One implication is that research informed by Habermas’s model is limited in its quest to create accountable and democratic reform (see for example Shapiro, 1997, 1998). A solution to these accountability and democratic problems is to consider the different approaches to language and examine any associations with middle-range accounting theory (Laughlin, 1995; Broadbent and Laughlin, 2004).

This provides an opportunity to examine why some critical accountants are unsatisfied with a staple diet that includes social and environmental accounting frameworks. A problem is that current accounting language integrates these ideas

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3 Habermas’s work on moral theory involves a Post-Kantian theme which singles out a procedure to solve moral issues. Habermas’s Weberian-derived interpretation of practical reason provides insights to the validity claims that confront individuals, where understanding is based on the presupposition that participants interact with one another in a decentred manner (Duvenage, 2003, p. 52). If we fail to differentiate between the different worlds then citizens face the dangers of objectivism (an objectifying attitude to the world), moralism (a norm-conformative attitude towards the world) and aestheticism (an expressive attitude toward the world). It is for these reasons that Habermas sets his ideal speech model as a means to test different validity claims that people make in actual reasoning. See also Rehg (1997) which also offers a Post-Kantian interpretation of Habermas’s ideal speech situation.

4 The validity claims that Habermas links through speech-acts develop the work of Austin, Chomsky, Searle and Wittgenstein. According to Habermas (1990, p. 66) ‘only those norms can claim to be valid
within the current system, and never really change anything (see Humphrey and Owen, 2000; Gray, 2002; Owen, et. al., 2001; Townley, et. al., 2003). From the preceding, it is then important to examine the nexus between language theory and accountability research which involves the arguments of Gadamer (1990), Habermas (1991) and Taylor (1991, 2003).

Through an examination of these accounting issues this paper posits a series of connections between accounting, language and moral theory. These connections are developed in four sections and begin with some contrary objections and opinions which are often advanced against interpretative and hermeneutic methodologies. The second and third sections discuss how Habermas’s model has been used to consider accountability relationships in context. The final section explores three fundamental accounting issues involving reason, rationality and social/environmental auditing. The issue to keep in mind is that to focus on language as a rule procedure, as opposed to appreciating that common goods exist, is a problem for accounting. This is because a focus on the regulative role of accounting tends to obscure (rather than reveal) the common values of significance that confront the world.

1. OBJECTIONS AND CONTRARY OPINIONS

The issue for accountability research is based around whether language renews itself in discourse, or provides a formal model to solve society’s problems. Taylor argues that language renews itself in discourse which is an idea that he develops from Johann Herder’s and Wilhelm von Humboldt’s seventeenth century arguments. Their point was that language does not simply designate meaning, but opens up a conversation of humanity (Habermas, 1991; Taylor, 1991). Duvenage (2003) has summarised von that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all those affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse’.
Humboldt’s argument concerning the limitations of a designative language theory. He stated that:

[Von Humboldt] excludes any possibility of a relation of pure designation (Bezeichnung) between a name and its object – based on a view that humans encounter objects in the way in which language leads them to them. (Duvenage, 2003, p. 125).

Von Humboldt maintained that language discloses meaning rather than ascribing it. Gadamer and Taylor have argued that Habermas’s universal assumptions limit the power of language to imagine new worlds (Taylor, 1989, p. 78). Moreover, Habermas’s designative and formal model cannot solve the conundrums that are expressed by people through language.\(^5\) The aim of this way of thinking is to develop a language of accounting that does not assimilate the logic of economics (Tinker, 1985; Tinker, et. al., 1991; Shearer, 2002). It was probably for reasons similar to these that Gray (1990a) argued that technical accounting is a ‘pathological sibling of economics’ and offers a realism to think about the world.

According to Taylor, within the ebb and flow of conversation, an element of a ‘universal’ exists within particular speech acts.\(^6\) Words are imprecise devices at the hands of an interlocutor in an Enlightenment sense: nor is accounting a technical discourse that reports with austere rigour.\(^7\) The argument is that this creates a

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5 Gadamer (1990) argues that Habermas’s approach is aligned too closely with that of modern scientific approaches which can legitimate a rational consensus. Gadamer (1990) stated: ‘[Habermas] lays the broad foundation of a meta-hermeneutical theory of communicative competence. After he has sketched a theory of the origination of the ego-id-ego structure on the basis of the experience of depth-psychology, the transition to the social realm appears to him entirely questionable. On the basis of such a general theory of communicative competence a “theory of the acquisition of the fundamental qualifications of role-guided behavior” becomes the counter-piece.

6 One reviewer questioned the truthfulness of participants in the process of engagement. This important question can miss the faith in humanity on which this approach is based on creating the type of society that nurtures commonalities needed to undercut a self-serving culture.

7 The argument of this paper maintains that Habermas’s work on moral theory is that of a Post-Kantian to whom discourse ethics represents ‘an attempt to elucidate the notion of impartiality connected with the moral point of view. This elucidation is accomplished by a principle of universalisation. Such
problem for accountants concerned with rigour and procedure, because conversation and discourse cannot be modelled in accordance with scientific principles. Here, Taylor refers to the work of Herder and von Humboldt in offering a different way to think about language. He stated:

But for Herder the existence of this representational or linguistic consciousness is the central question. What is it which makes it possible for us to have this distinct, focussed awareness of things, where animals remain caught in the dream-like, melodic flow of experience? It is language that makes this possible. Hence language must be probed from an entirely different point of view. It is not just a set of signs which have meaning in virtue of referring to something, it is the necessary vehicle of a certain form of consciousness, which is characteristically human, the distinct grasp of things which Herder calls ‘reflection’ (Besonnenheit). In other terms, words do not just refer, they are also precipitates of an activity in which the human form of consciousness comes to be. So they not only describe a world, they also express a mode of consciousness, in the double sense outlined above, that is, they realize it, and they make determinate what mode it is. (Taylor, 1975, p. 19).

Taylor emphasises the factors excluded by Habermas, even though some problems with paternalism and relativism might emerge (see Shapiro, 1997). Yet, a broader way to think about language does not lead to relativism because better interpretations are more encompassing. In fact, the provision of better interpretations can in turn be ranked according to their range and scope. Furthermore, any trace of relativism is not necessarily a problem because discourse using these nuanced expressions leads to new ideas and concepts. The development of new ideas is particularly important for accounting, a discipline which has often simply followed economic discourse (Shearer, 2002). Accounting can be constructed as a technology to report to relevant publics and thereby challenge the dominant hegemony of capitalism. For example, harmonisation processes can locate what is common between different accounting systems thereby offering better interpretations of the culture, language and values that they embody (Taylor, 2002). It is, therefore, a category error to argue that Taylor ignores the dimensions of all that are different and diverse in society through a focus on principles typically attempt to reconstruct what we might call the idealized logic or norms governing impartial thinking.’ (Rehg, 1997, p. xvi).
on what is common. The focus of this thinking is that significant social and environmental values must be integrated into accounting thinking (see Shapiro, 1998; Gray, 2002).

According to the view expressed above, Gadamer and Taylor provide a hermeneutic critique of Habermas’s attempt to salvage and solve the unfinished project of modernity. They engage with Habermas’s formal approach to language which has an affinity Kantian ethical approaches (Taylor, 1989, p. 78; Taylor, 2003). These ideas are useful to consider how accounting can satisfy society’s information needs and not assimilate to the logic of economics (Shearer, 2002), nor succumb to relativism (Shapiro, 1997). The implication of this thinking involves how the social accounting project can contribute to a just and fair society (Gray et al., 1987, 1988, 1991; Laughlin, 1990; Williams, 1987; Roberts, 1991; Shearer, 2002).

The familiar ethical position of accounting is entrenched deeply in a theme that Habermas develops from the work of Kant ‘which is a discourse that harkens back to the Enlightenment discourse of rationalization as the pursuit of reason in human affairs’ (Townley, et. al., 2003, p. 2). The questions for environmental and social accounting concern whether rule procedures are capable of reconciling the claims made by different groups in the communication model. A primary concern is

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8 Habermas’s political concern is with the return of Nazi sentiment in Germany. His aim is to curtail the role of language by implementing firm procedural rules. He writes against German Romanticism (Sturm und Drang) and how volk politics elevates the nation-state. In his famous Berlin lectures of 1995 (marking the 50th anniversary of the surrender of the German Republic) he stated that what is necessary post-1989 is a republicanism which shakes off parochialism and localism. What is need is ‘a public sphere extending throughout Europe [that] must be formed, which will allow its citizens, and not just its governments to take part in a common process of shaping a political will. Many people regard that as a mere utopia. But the very global problems today that are now overwhelming us and arousing skepticism are also driving us, for reasons of our own-self-interest, in precisely this direction.’ (Habermas, 1995, p. 176).

9 A broad and interpretative reconsideration of accounting is in fact similar in many respects to Habermas’s early work on aesthetics which has been submerged in his recent fascination with Post-Kantian Theory. Habermas (1993, pp. 129-164) stated: ‘Is it possible that one day an emancipated
to examine whether Habermas’s procedural interpretation of language theory limits the role of accounting and accountability in the public sphere. The accountability issue involves whether the moral implications of accounting can be solved through a procedural model. It is, therefore, important to remember that Habermas associates his work on morality with Kant’s derivation of principles of justice. The family relationship between Habermas and Post-Kantians involves their respective attempts to determine whether a maxim can be made universal. That is, whether any resulting outcome on the rightfulness of a strategic action can be justified.\(^\text{10}\)

Habermas states:

> What moral theory can do and should be trusted to do is to clarify the universal core of our moral intuitions and thereby to refute value scepticism. What it cannot do is make any kind of substantive contribution. By singling out a procedure of decision making, it seeks to make room for those involved, who must find answers on their own to the moral-practical issues that come at them, or are imposed on them, with objective historical force (Habermas, 1990, p. 211).

A role of moral theory is to single out a procedure to solve moral and social dilemmas through a formal theory of language which determines the admissibility of claims about truth.\(^\text{11}\) Both Gadamer and Taylor have engaged with the moral and linguistic dimensions in Habermas’s *A Theory of Communicative Action* (Vols. 1 and 2) and offered alternative frameworks.

Yet, some accounting thinkers have used Habermas’s theory of language to examine connections between accounting and democratic theory (Arrington and human race could encounter itself within an expanded space of discursive formation of will and yet be robbed of the light in which it is capable of interpreting its life as something good?’.

Yet, a further limitation that confronts Habermas’s language theory is that it does not consider why some people can enter the discourse model without leaving behind important values and ideas while others are required to dispense with their background values. It seems strange that ‘others’ must ignore their important constitutive values that shape their moral sense and purpose when they enter the discourse arena.

Taylor (2003) observed ‘Habermas’s view has the advantage of allowing for our sense that one’s ethical views can be right or wrong, better or worse. He espouses a “cognitivist” position, even though what makes the right position right is not its corresponding to “facts”. Many of the attempts to establish a fact/value dichotomy have foundered on their espousal of an implausible subjectivism’ (p.305).
Puxty, 1991); how accounting colonises the social world (Laughlin, 1987); and to
develop new systems toward a normative model of rational argumentation (Shapiro,
1998). In response to these positions, the language work of both Gadamer (1991) and
Taylor (1991) are used to argue that Habermas’s problem solving approach limits the
that language does not just designate meaning, but is a vehicle that expresses new
ideas to inform the communities that comprise society. The accountability and
accounting issue, therefore, involves whether Habermas’s model can assess
communication that is incompatible with the good or better life through his formal
model of discourse (Habermas, 1993, pp. 56-57). Habermas develops a procedure
that substantive claims must pass in order to be normatively valid. This test consists
of universal rules of discourse – reciprocal accountability, inclusiveness, freedom to
question claims and to presuppose counter-claims, and non-coercion. These reflect
the legitimate procedural constraints citizens are entitled to make, that indicate the
basis for rational agreement regarding the ‘justness’ of a given norm, and that of
assertoric statements.

Briefly, then, the differences between Gadamer, Habermas and Taylor involve
the intersubjective and objective role that is performed by language; that is, it involves
whether words and ideas correlate with real-world objects or reveal themselves as a
conversation unfolds. For accountability purposes, this involves understanding
whether good systems emerge in the process of discussions that concern how to
reconcile differences in society; or, whether differences can be ranked according to an
idealised set of communicative criteria. Here, Taylor is at his most rhetorical in

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12 Habermas (1993, pp. 56–57) states that ‘we presuppose a dialogical situation that satisfies ideal
conditions in a number of respects, including…freedom of access, equal rights to participate,
thoroughness on the part of participants, absence of coercion in taking positions, and so forth’ (p. 56).
maintaining that language cannot be treated as an objective structure and argues that new political strategies are needed (Taylor, 1991). His vision is informed by a conception of a civilising society; namely, one which is committed to moral progress and development (Taylor, 1975). This thinking involves the addition of a further step in accountability research to explore the nexus between the structure and practice of language. That is, for Taylor the structure of language is also shaped by culture and the background nuances that shape people’s being-in-the-world.

As a consequence, it is problematic whether a set of rules cultivates character or, instead, frustrates citizens in that they must always follow a rule to which they are not accustomed. According to Taylor, Habermas’s theory generates anomie, frustration and ultimately perhaps a recalcitrant polity (Taylor, 1989, p. 80). For Habermas, on the other hand, a clear and precise solution must be found in language. Habermas’s reliance on Kantian procedure blocks the power of language, and its individualism prevents the development of that common space where people respect others and the differences which make up society. Taylor argues:

So Kant’s thesis [is] that moral reasoning imposes on us the requirement of being able to universalize the maxims of our will, and Jurgen Habermas’ discourse ethic is seen as binding on us in virtue of our being interlocutors who seek to convince each other. Now this too doesn’t seem to me to work. It may seem to leave us without any way of backing our feeling, that we have come to an ethically superior position in relation to our ancestors of 400 years ago, with reasons. But I don’t believe this is so. There is a way of proceeding, by what I have tried to call ‘supersession arguments’, where we show that there is a rational path from A to B, but not in the reverse direction. But we have to see this path not only as a line of argument, and not only as an actual transition, but as both together. (Taylor, 1999, p.161).

That is, the nuances of culture and the life-world impact on the formation of a language which is something alien to the Post-Kantian tradition. Habermas has responded to Taylor:

Of course Humboldt is not an empiricist trying to pull the rug out from under the feet of the process of reaching understanding and hold the identity of linguistic meanings to emanate from the randomly iterated intentions – constantly superseding each other – of single, isolated speakers. For him, the intersubjectivity of a common perspective does not dissolve, for example, into a
series of isolated I-perspectives which are merely reflected in one another; rather, it arises at the same time; and from the same source as intersubjective validity of semantically identical linguistic expressions and is of equal origin (gleich-ursprünglich). (Habermas, 1991, pp. 56–57).

Habermas argues that Taylor’s Hegelian focus is on the ‘we’ perspective implicit in language which leads to the socialisation of individuals within practices that abrogate personal rights. In sum, accountability research based on Habermas’s assumptions may not have the power to create social change and create a reconciliation with and between members of society.

From the preceding, Habermas’s very strong claims presuppose that in the ‘vertigo’ of the ideal speech situation each participant will, through a complete process of participant perspectives unleash, the ‘higher-level intersubjectivity of the deliberating collective’ (Habermas, 1996, p. 280). This paper does not deny the usefulness of Habermas’s thinking in drawing attention to marginalised issues such as social and environmental accounting theory (Laughlin, 1986, 1995). It will be recalled that Power, Laughlin and Cooper (2002) have pointed out the relevance of Habermas’s thinking. They quote Habermas’s argument that:

...a speaker can rationally motivate a hearer to accept his speech act offer because...he can assume the warranty [Gewähr] for providing, if necessary, convincing reasons that would stand up to a hearer’s criticism of the validity claim. Thus a speaker owes the binding (or bonding: bindende) force of his illocutionary act not to the validity of what is said, but to the coordinating effect of the warranty that he offers; namely, to redeem, if necessary, the validity claim raised with his speech act. (Habermas 1984, p. 302, emphasis in original)

The strong assumption is that a speaker and hearer in the communicative sphere owe each other reciprocal recognition. This means that each assertion is given a warrant to enter the ‘ideal speech situation’ where people are transformed by the regulative structure of the better argument. Rather than just assess and regulate different claims this paper aims to add some theoretical support to the arguments made by Francis (1994), Schweiker (1991) and Shearer (2002). Thus, accounting and auditing have
the potential to develop ‘the good’ where the good society is one which recognises normative values and reconciles differences.

A particularly pertinent example of the potential to intervene through discourse can be found in Arnold and Hammond (1987). They explored how additional social information can contribute to the struggle against corrupt regimes, such as in South Africa. Therefore, rather than rank and order validity claims it is necessary that accounting theory consider how to reconcile differences. In advocating this strategy this argument differs from traditional accounting approaches that use Habermasian, or Rawlsian principles of justice (see Laughlin, 1987, Lehman, 1995). It will be recalled that Rawls in his *Theory of Justice* argued that ‘the good is not an ordered scheme of final ends’ and the only means to arrive at fair decisions is through a decision procedure that ranks different validity claims (Rawls, 1971, p. 367). This draws out a series of differences from Habermasian and Rawlsian decision models which have offered appealing ways to extend the craft of accounting (Laughlin, 1995; Gray, 2002). Nevertheless, despite their respective attempts to create social change their rational assumptions perpetuate a strategy that remains caught within the confines of the present.

Further, it is argued that the development of new reporting practices must begin through consideration of new premises that involve a normative vision. This vision is informed by an optimistic account of human nature that maintains that it is possible to reconcile differences in society. This does not mean that a vision of the good is imposed on people as some might argue. Rather, agreement is a fruit of democratic interchange and that the power of language can be used to reform accounting and contribute to democratic debates. This argument is based on the supposition that meaning and understanding unfold just like understanding evolves in
conversation. In an accounting context, no one set of accounts can provide indubitable solutions to create justice in financial reporting. What is needed is a fundamental reformulation of accounting and its relationship with society where meaning unfolds in an ongoing and interactive manner. This way of thinking is a distant shore for technical accounting. The aim of this paper is to argue for a way of thinking that provides information and data that contribute to the common values which shape the good society rather than the other way around.

In sum, it is argued that Habermas’s complex argument boils down to the claim that an agreement reached in the discourse arena is to take precedence over the value that lies within a particular truth claims that people advance. According to Habermasian reasoning, it is possible to move from disagreement to agreement when interlocutors give ground to the superior position. This paper claims that Habermasian research might benefit through consideration of a way of thinking about language and society which reconciles differences and fuses horizons thereby enriching communication and discourse. The issue is whether the language of accounting (performance indicators, balanced score-cards, ethical audits) can create reconciliation and enrich communities. Thus, Taylor’s development of Gadamer’s work on language theory and method exposes the illusions that a formal theory of language creates (Taylor, 2002). Their work is important in understanding how a focus on rules and universal maxims can perpetuate a culture which offers only a limited and technical role for accounting in the public sphere (Taylor, 2003). For accounting research, rather than simply harmonise systems of accounting, there is a need to explicitly consider issues associated with common values, differences, and rule procedure (see Lehman, 1999, 2004).

2. ACCOUNTING, PROCEDURE AND LANGUAGE
This section argues that language theory can be developed to connect with the political realism of Francis (1994) and Townley, et al., (2003). They concur in their assessment that free-market rationality and neo-classical economic models offer a limited conception of the public realm. Furthermore, agreement is reflected in the connections between language and practical reason as means to facilitate the public sphere. This argument is based on the supposition that at the very least the public sphere must reflect what is common between people. Here the task for accounting is, inter alia, to consider how roads, universities and hospitals are integral to the social fabric of a society and should never be reduced to a calculable number in a market framework. The synthesis between Gadamer and Taylor, in this regard, offers another way to think about the common values that animate the work of Francis (1994) and Townley, et al., (2003). These authors share a focus that reconciliation and moral development matter, where focussed thinking is needed on the substantive issues which reflect belief, culture and being. Yet, technical accounting and harmonised accounting frameworks often glide over these values and limit the role of practical reason. As Francis (1994) observed, accountants need to think about practical reasoning in matters at the heart of accounting and to make good judgements.

Habermas has responded to this way of thinking about language and society by maintaining that when Gadamer and Taylor talk about the importance of establishing a connection with tradition they are offering a conservative ethic. However, this is a category error because tradition means that one ‘is not exhausted by the heritage that one knows and is conscious of’ (Gadamer, 1991, p. 288). The problem for the development of reform accounting and theory is that relativist problems might emerge when social progress is limited by the history associated with tradition (Shapiro, 1998). But this seems to be a key problem for modern accounting
which is unable to escape its economic terms of reference. Here it is worth remembering Gadamer’s point that:

[T]he existing conditions [which] is no less a form of connection to tradition than is a defense of existing conditions (Gadamer, 1990, p. 288).

Gadamer is offering a pathway that is apposite for accounting if it wants to escape the technical thinking that grips modernity. In fact, the application to accounting and accountability research involves examining how language is connected with practical reason (phronesis): where phronesis involves interpreting and making good judgements. The accounting scholar, Francis (1994), explained the role of Aristotle’s phronesis in accounting for the public interest where reasoned argument unfolds in the process of justification in a conversation. Technical accounting fails to develop this approach and supports either a means-end process of calculation and control, or a procedural derivation of principles of justice. The task confronting accounting is to re-align itself with a way of thinking where meaning unfolds as conversations develop. Therefore the aim is to recognise that formal and designative ways to think about the connections between accounting and society create and impose more rules on communities (Francis, 1994; Shapiro, 1997, 1998).

Furthermore, the supposition that language discloses new worlds can be linked with Townley, et. al., (2003) who considered the role of performance measurement and managerialism. Their thinking involved whether performance procedures and managerial processes create reasoned justifications in the public sphere. They argued that performance measures extend a market economy and a managerial focus in society. Tracing these ideas back to the focus on the public sphere involves how language, reason and justification shape a social system (Gadamer, 1975; Taylor, 1991, 1993, 2003). A first connecting premise is that the social sphere and its communicative channels cannot be modelled with abstract neatness. This is because
communication, reasoned justification and practical reason reflect ‘[a] “messy” process’ which actually mirrors the real world. It is probably for these reasons that Francis (1994) argued that judgement, training and history are equally important for auditing and accounting professionals.

From the above, an interpretative and interactive framework can be used to extend Francis (1994) and Townley et. al., (2003) to consider how a focus on rules - such as accounting standards - can subsume other values of significance for society (see Taylor, 1993). An accountability structure that moves beyond a balanced scorecard, due processes, audit committees and whistleblowing techniques is needed. Arguably, from the debates concerning language new ways to think about modernity and accounting mechanisms can be offered. The issue to keep in mind is that despite the utility of Habermas’s model, a tendency exists to suppress moral factors as subjective preferences.

In sum, Habermas maintains language’s role must be tamed and any seductive powers are to be resisted if it is not to dominate our thinking and return to a pre-Enlightenment world of myths and illusions (Gambling, 1977, 1987). Accordingly, for Habermas, important issues of truth and knowledge can only be decided when words are defined precisely and operate as instruments. A peculiar form of austerity and rigour, alien to the conduct of dialogue, is assumed according to Habermasian procedure (Lehman, 2005). Habermasian frameworks therefore have the potential to suppress moral values in a procedural structure that perpetuates a managerial and controlled society.

3. MIDDLE-RANGE ACCOUNTING AND LANGUAGE THEORY

One important strain of critical accounting scholarship has been motivated by Habermas’s procedural reason as a means to decentre our understanding of the world.
For example, Broadbent and Laughlin (2004) have explored the effects of accounting on health-care systems and the implications of modern bureaucratic accounting and have offered some political recommendations. They have argued that the health care sector has been colonised by free-market forms of reason and rationality, but this has been at the expense of a caring health system. Free-market reforms put money and rationality first and people second. A further problem is that each individual (monologic) agent must counteract the distortions of modernity and its culture of money, power and procedural rationality. This is to be achieved through the development of undistorted communication which moderate the often unanalysed and distorting variable, power in the public sphere.

Therefore, critical accounting scholarship reliant on Habermas’s model has seemingly avoided debates concerning the role that language plays; that is, ways are left open for traditional accounting techniques to continually colonise the pragmatic space of reason (Power and Laughlin, 1996). Yet, another interpretation is that the nexus between accounting and language is that the art of giving an account expresses the value choices which:

Underlie accounting practices (though often invisibly so) that accounting is a political as well as a moral practice (Francis, 1990, p. 7).

The focus moves from systems and life-worlds to the common goods which shape society and, in turn, form its social systems. This way of thinking extends to Cooper and Sherer’s (1984, p. 208) political economy perspective by contributing to the struggles which involves how to engage in the political economy of accounting. Cooper and Sherer (1984, p. 208) argued:

Our position, that the objectives for accounting are fundamentally contested, arises out of the recognition that an accounting contains a representation of a specific social and political context. Not only is accounting policy essentially political in that it derives from the political struggle in a society as a whole but also the outcomes of accounting policy are essentially political in that they operate for the benefit of some groups in society and to the detriment of others.
This adds to the accountant’s lexicon an explicit acknowledgment concerning the moral and background contexts which shape how people make decisions. Yet, Habermas’s method continues to limit the role of language and, in turn, the possibilities involved in reforming the craft of accounting.

In developing the political-economy implications of accounting it is in Laughlin (1995) that Habermas’s method is developed to shuttle between a skeletal ontology and empirical observation to imagine what is accounting. Laughlin argued that Merton’s framework enriches a skeletal ontology through empirical contextualisation at the policy level. Laughlin’s applied and pragmatic approach builds on Habermas’s work while acknowledging the important role that Merton’s analysis played in explaining social behaviour. Laughlin states that the aim is to search for theories of accounting ‘with a pervasive concern with consolidating special theories into more generalisable theories’ (Merton, 1968, pp. 52-53 found in Laughlin, 1995, p. 79). Later, he adds that:

The “middle-range” that is referred to below has no faith in the development of such a general theory. Put simply the “middle range” of this essay maintains that there can only ever be “skeletal” theories in social phenomena – the hope for a grand theory, similar to Parsonian thought, is wistful and incorrect quasi-scientific thinking of a highly questionable nature. But this is only one of the areas of difference – the “middle-range” thinking in this essay also differs to Merton’s emphasis on methodology (with its desire finally, although maybe immediately, to adopt highly theoretical methods for investigation) and change (with its purposeful distance from getting involved in any value judgements about what is being investigated.

The supposition that is implied is that accounting is a practice which moves in a space of reason. Here, Gadamer and Taylor share another insight which maintains that language cannot be thought of as a mere abstract and idealising activity. Language must be thought of from a different perspective and this involves understanding it as a common and shared good; after all, how can societies function if there are no common goods? The question is how do accounting and accountability research contribute to the derivation of good decisions (such as in accounting practice).
A further problem for Habermasian accounting research is whether accounting and accountability mechanisms are universal in their reach. Rather, language is an ongoing and interactive activity which reflects the twists and turns as it unfolds. The role of language can never be mastered, nor can it be expressed with austere rigour according to pre-determined and universal rules. Therefore, the applied Habermasian turn in critical accounting is limited by its focus on pragmatic rules to adjudicate validity claims. That is, Habermasian reforms also limit imagination and the goals to which accounting might aspire. Imagination and vision might be the last line of defence to protect accountability and its structures of governance.

Furthermore, additional a regulative and Post-Kantian theme can be found in Broadbent, Laughlin and Read (1991). They argued that:

the evaluatory model [should concentrate] on judging the constitutive or regulative characteristics from the organizational systems viewpoint (Broadbent, Laughlin and Read, 1991, pp. 9-10).

The issue that presents itself is whether accountability structures must be regulated in this way? A further question concerns whether the organisational form can ever be considered as an agent capable of delivering social change? These are particularly important questions given that modern social and accountability theory must build a richly textured, multidisciplinary conceptual foundation for analysis and research on corporate social change activities. Yet, Power and Laughlin (Power and Laughlin, 1996, p. 448) focus on the regulative ideal as a means to consider the actual and possible roles for accounting. They state:

What remains important to a critical theory of accounting which follows Habermas’ later work is not so much an ability to give ex ante a clear criterion for

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13 Power and Laughlin (1996) have unpacked this notion in their accountability interpretation of Habermas’s Between Facts and Norms which integrate two famous strands of thought. One strand of thought is based on the ideas of Hegel and the other on the ideas of Kant. Habermas combines their ideas to offer a model where the rule of law is now the mechanism to judge different claims made in democratic societies (Habermas, 1996).
distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate roles of accounting and the law, but some kind of explicit commitment to this as a regulative ideal which moves in the theoretical space between the actual and the possible.

Here, the focus turns on Habermas’s consensus-building strategy which involves transforming our basic institutions to create openness and critical space in the public sphere. Indeed, Broadbent and Laughlin claim that public institutions must satisfy the need ‘for some debate about what these institutions are actually trying to achieve’ (Broadbent and Laughlin, 1993, p. 364). But is this enough?

The different approaches to language theory pose some conundrums for democratic theory together with accountability implications. The democratic conundrums involve how to determine whether the needs of the minority are submerged in democratic processes. Put differently, it is questionable whether a procedural model has the imaginative and expressive abilities to create an accounting strategy that interprets and enriches our understanding of the world. It is as if Habermasian accountability misses this step in its attempt to improve communication, language and democratic accountability (see section 1).\textsuperscript{14} For accountability – itself a contested concept – this sociological generalisation does not mean that accountability must remain defined within the current system.

One way to overcome the limits that Habermas imposes on moral theory (and therefore democratic accountability) involves tackling injustice through a conversational strategy itself premised on a community of shared common values. Taylor states that:

\begin{quote}
People can bond not in spite of, but because of, difference. They can sense, that is, that the difference enriches each party, that their lives are narrower and less full alone than they are in association with each other. In this sense, the difference defines a complementarity (Taylor, 2001, p. 89).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} As Habermas (1991) argued Hegel grounded practical reason in the particular activities of everyday living but this leaves no room for judging different validity claims. Hegel’s principal focus, at a very general level of analysis, was to avoid some of the difficulties associated with Kant’s search to locate universal moral mechanisms through the \textit{a priori} capacities of the human mind (mentalism).
From this Habermas’s assumption that legitimation and recognition are independent of force and agreement becomes problematic. After all, force and agreement are the foundation of authority in a civilising society and it is the task. Gadamer response to Habermas is to ask whether agreement between citizens must always be based on a separation between authority and legitimacy. Gadamer asks:

Is one never allowed to do this? Does not Habermas makes the same presupposition when he recognizes that such a non-forceful agreement would come about under the guiding idea of social life free from coercion and domination (Gadamer, 1990, p. 287).

4. RECONCILING ACCOUNTABILITY

Power and Laughlin (1996) argue that any accounting practice, whether ‘actual or desired, must move in the space of what Habermas calls pragmatic discourse’. They argue that:

In addition, the whole point of any system of accounting must be to relieve social agents of the burden of redesigning an information system for every decision. Habermas also reminds us that the romanticism of an abandonment of accounting is no longer possible. We must face up to the fact that all accountings are simultaneously non-accountings, that making things visible makes other things invisible (Broadbent, et. al., 1994) and that the structure of an ideal speech situation is, as a matter of necessity and even desirability, compromised in concrete settings. (Power and Laughlin, 1996, p. 461).

From the above, a legitimate concern for accountability involves three significant issues. They involve:

(a) **Reason** and Rationality;

(b) **Social Audit** and Social Accounting;

(c) **Impartiality** and Relativism.

(a) **Reason and Rationality**

Francis (1994), Schweiker (1991) and Townley, *et. al.*, (2003) have developed links between accounting, accountability and democratic theory. They share Habermas’s supposition that:

[R]ational speech free from coercion always presupposes a certain emancipation of the right life. Only then can such speech be successful. The idea of truth,
which measures itself on true consensus, includes the idea of coming to age

Here Habermas offers essentially a false ontological self-understanding that separates
authority and enlightenment. This problem haunts modern accounting in that it has
often ignored its role in creating a civil society. This is because it has focussed on
economic mechanisms at the expense of shared values. While it might be conceded
that technical conceptual accounting frameworks have begun to address these
concerns, they have done no more than assimilate environmental and social
accounting within the current structures of modernity (see Gray, 2002).

Indeed, accounting theorists such as Shapiro (1998, p. 643) have expressed a
commitment to Habermas’s (1991, p. 217) argument. This is an argument ‘that all
participants involved use the same expressions in a semantically identical manner, for
without this idealizing precondition, they would not be able to enter into dialogue in
the first place’ (Habermas, 1991, p. 217). Shapiro continues that an:

argument is considered an informal fallacy if it violates the maxims and thereby
prevents participants from achieving the goals of a critical discussion (Shapiro,

He echoes Habermas’s claim that ‘without this idealizing precondition, they would
not be able to enter into dialogue in the first place’. Again, a connection with this
paper’s argument that a precise solution to moral issues is Habermas’s aim.
Nevertheless, accountability research must also respond to different conceptions of
the good society which are excluded when the life-world and its systems are
constrained as they are by procedure.

A different way to think about ‘reasoning’ involves the disclosing potential in
language which impact on its social role. This reformed communicative strategy is
not only concerned with the reformation of accounting, but also with its
transformation. Habermas’s ethic puts different claims on trial through a process that
determines whether claims legitimately bind participants. Again Habermas demonstrates his predilection for procedure. He states:

Discourse theory attempts to reconstruct this self-understanding [that of a universalistic moral consciousness and the liberal institutions of the democratic state] in a way that empowers its intrinsic normative meaning and logic to resist both scientific reductions and aesthetic assimilations…After a century that more than any other has taught us the horror of existing unreason, the last remains of an essentialist trust in reason are destroyed. Yet modernity, now aware of its contingencies, depends all the more on a procedural reason, that is, a reason that puts itself on trial. The critique of reason is its own work: this Kantian double meaning is due to the radically anti-Platonic insight that there is neither a higher nor a deeper reality to which we could appeal – we who find ourselves already situated in our linguistically structured forms of life (Habermas, 1996, p. 11).

From this, it is apparent that Habermas maintains that his framework arrives at just outcomes. This form of reasoning is also evident in Laughlin and Broadbent (1993) who have stated ‘there is a need to debate whether this really is “good” from the perspective of [these] key institutions and society more generally’ (p. 364). The question remains whether such an approach to regulation can arrive at fair outcomes when the decision model is based on a series of rational validity claims. It is, therefore, arguable whether a process of rational deliberation without a full discussion of the processes of impartiality responds fully to the urgencies of cultural and social values in a spirit of openness and democratic accountability.

(b) Social and Environmental Audit

A further series of issues that follow from language theory can be found in Gray (2002) which impact on social and environmental accounting (Humphrey and Owen, 2000). Gray argued for an imaginative social accounting and related it with a social analysis of the causes that have given rise to such things as misery, suffering, and environmental degradation. Gray’s analysis examines these intricate relationships in society and the role of accounting in providing a point of reflection concerning humanity’s attitude to the natural environment.
In most recent times, Tinker and Gray (2003) have attempted to combine different approaches using a critical and dialectical synthesis to reform accounting. Nevertheless, one wonders whether a critical accounting perspective can break free from the dominant modern ways of thinking. Again, it is in Taylor’s work that we find new ideas to escape the epistemology of modernity and its technical stance to nature. He states:

The original impulse of nature is right, but the effect of a depraved culture is that we lose contact with it. We suffer this loss because we can no longer depend on ourselves and this inner impulse, but rather on others and on what they think of us, expect from us, admire or despise in us, reward or punish in us. We are separated from nature by the dense web of opinion which is woven between us in society and can no longer recover contact with it. (Taylor, 1989, p. 357).

Here, Taylor’s moral realism confronts the dense web of connections between people and their natural environment. This thinking connects with Gray (2002) who argued for an imaginative accounting. In concurring with Gray (2003) it is argued that reform must involve the promotion of conversation and dialogue that can reform accountability structures (social accounting praxis). That is, social accounting can be combined with a richer conception of the different ‘forms of life’, shaped as they are by linguistic structures. It will be remembered that these links are built on a recognition that commonalities between people exist. A new role for accounting, therefore, involves nurturing these commonalities as part of a non-conformist stance to the present procedural epistemology.

In turn, the non-conformist stance advanced in this paper reflects an expressive dimension between people and nature. These dimensions also connect with the social audit work of Humphrey and Owen (2000). Interestingly, their paper developed Power’s Audit Society to consider the connections between social audit and society. They claimed that a therapy for the failures of accounting involve ‘regarding the type of values that society wishes to prevail’ (p. 37). Their analysis supports a
normative stance that shapes an accountability structure which nurture the nexus between social practice and the language mechanisms that shape a good society.

In turn, Humphrey and Owen (p. 37) advocate ‘keep[ing] the debate going with respect to the audit society’. From such a vista, social and environmental auditing do not simply focus on reforming democratic structures. They endeavour to enrich that process by understanding the ‘factors, causes and motives underlying or driving the rise of the audit society’ (p. 37). One escape route is that offered in this paper where social audit is connected with a language that reveals meaning; or, put differently how the language of accounting involves a kind of revelation when one person finally understands the other. Again, it is Taylor who develops Gadamer’s earlier work on the commonalities that shape society. Taylor states:

[I]t is related rather to the kind of understanding we invoke in personal relations when we say, for instance: ‘I find him hard to understand’; or at last I understand her’. To switch for a minute to another language, it is the kind of understanding one invokes in French when one says ‘maintenant on s’entend’. We are talking here in these cases of what you could call human understanding, understanding what makes someone tick, or how he feels or acts as a human being (Taylor, 1980, p. 30).

Taylor claims that when an interlocutor finally understands another he is talking about recognising their identity and values. This poses a further challenge for technical accounting as it involves how to accommodate different values such as culture and different accounting systems. For accounting, this involves the art of interpretation to reveal social audit and consider ‘the possibilities for auditing to serve a more positive role in society’ (Humphrey and Owen, 2000, p. 29). Here, language theory invites a reconciliation between accounting and society; namely, one where the limitations of corporate rationality are made explicit and open up new ways to think.15 In sum, social audit movement provides a path to open up new vistas, thereby offering a

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15 A strategy to re-align corporate rationality with the common values that are revealed through language involves a regulative structure (such as a social audit) that is backed not simply by the rule of law but a social system which nurtures these values.
realistic account of corporate affairs (for examples see Arnold and Hammond, 1994; Arnold and Sikka, 2002).

Accordingly, the nexus between accountability and society involves challenging accounting researchers to consider questions of virtue in the cultivation of a sense of forgiveness, magnanimity and reasonableness.\textsuperscript{16} It will be recalled that Francis (1994) considered practices whereby accounting and auditing professionals exercise a sense of moral judgement \textit{phronesis}). Further, Humphrey and Owen (2000, p.29) offered a similar analysis and concluded that it is ‘unlikely that we will ever get the ‘audits’, let alone the society, that we really want’.

\textbf{(c) Relativism, Language and Impartiality}

Further, accounting related issues turn on how Habermas’s meso-level analysis connects with not only accountability, but also the quest to escape modernity’s procedural epistemology. The task for accounting is to begin to think about how to escape from a procedural society and involves recognising the political struggles in which accounting is involved (Cooper and Sherer, 1984; Hines, 1988). The aim is to create better links between the social structure and the language of accounting thereby recognising the common values that nurture spirit. These are the values that have been neglected by the limitations of economic individualism.

In this regard, the reform of accountability might be achieved through a process of reciprocal recognition that considers new ideas and values which unfold as

\textsuperscript{16} As one reviewer noted that this way of thinking is an extremely idealistic way to think about language and society. While it might be an optimistic account of practical reason it is nevertheless the case that a need exists to construct a space of reasons where conversation through whereby environmental and social auditing can recognise the common need to alleviate the damage inflicted by corporate activity.
language is enacted. Here, it is Gadamer’s strong interpretation of linguistic structures that provides another way to think about communication. Gadamer states:

Our first point is that the language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must be first worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 378-379).

Here, Gadamer argues that the role of language cannot be constrained by procedure as argued by Habermas (1991, 1999) but must be developed from an entirely different point of view. Accounting has the potential to arbitrate discourse and evaluate the claims made in the discourse arena (Shapiro, 1998). The question remains: will people give up their individual validity claims to follow the decision reached in the model? This remains a critical concern even if Habermas can prove that his ideal speech framework is an intuitive reflection of the conditions people would use to justify validity claims.

From the above, the question is whether it is possible for participants in an accounting conversation to be divorced from their background values such as culture, community and locality? In an accounting context, Shapiro (1997, 1998) has adapted this Habermasian thinking to adjudicate between accounting disputes (such as pension plans, retirement income and derivate formations). His rule based language is based on a series of rules to test whether particular accounting maxims are right and wrong (Shapiro, 1997). While this approach tests the accounting maxim from ‘the point of view from which action norms can be impartially grounded’ (Habermas, 1996, p.
it remains open whether principles of rationality lead to impartial outcomes. That is do they contribute to better communicative structures?

As Gadamer has observed the problem for Habermas involves the connections between rationality and impartiality together with legitimacy and authority. From an ontological perspective there is no necessary correlation between them and this is because in human communities agreement are continually in the process of negotiation (Gadamer, 1990, p.287). Nevertheless, in keeping the debate going Shapiro (1997) is right to observe that a need exists to adjudicate between accounting maxims and avoid relativism. Yet, Gadamer (1990) has already offered a response in his explanation that language does more than illuminate distorted practice and test the rightness of maxims. He stated:

Even though research has not yet advanced sufficiently far, it would not alter the fundamental situation that with the help of the knowledge of the conditions of systematically disrupted communication, agreement of an ideal dimension would be reached, one which would necessarily bring about consensus. By itself such a consensus could be a rational criterion of truth. Without such a theory to combat it, one would fall prey to a ‘supporting agreement’ of forced consensus without being able to see through it. … Nonetheless, there is one thing which is not quite correct. Here we are dealing with groups, groups formed of individuals living in agreement. Between groups agreement is destroyed and sought again. But, this does not occur between individuals and the speech community, a community from which they are split by their neuroses. Who is it here who has been split apart? What desymbolization must occur, for instance with the word ‘democracy’? One the basis of what competence will this be done? It goes without saying that behind these notions there must be a concept of freedom for all. Habermas says accordingly: rational speech free from coercion always presupposes a certain anticipation of the right life. Only then can such speech be successful. “The idea of truth, which measures itself on true consensus, includes the idea of coming of age” (Gadamer, 1990, pp. 286-287).

Gadamer observes that Habermas’s conception of truth is metaphysical in origin and reflects a certain Kantian detachment from the ‘messiness of the real world’ (Francis, 1994; Rehg, 1997, pp. 31-32). The accountability issue involves whether conversation between citizens can be determined in isolation from each other. As stated throughout this paper, Habermasian theory involves affirming whether a maxim is valid; its outcomes fair ‘when everyone, in order to satisfy the interests of each
individual, can freely accept it and its consequences that they foresee deriving from its universal applicability.’ (Pellizzoni, 1999, p. 119) However, Pellizzoni has explained this feature makes the universalizing rule impossible to enforce. This is because it is not possible to evaluate the primary and side effects of a choice: it is simply an impossibility. Pellizzoni continues:

It becomes questionable deciding what the effects will be, with axiological orientations – the validity of which, following Habermas, this evaluation should help us to ascertain. Habermas says that a policy is fair only if its implementation is equally good for each individual. But one is prevented from reaching an agreement on a policy, deemed desirable to everyone having an interest in the issue, due to the impossibility of stating with reasonable certainty what the output of the implementation will be. (Pellizzoni, 1999, p. 119.)

Pellizzoni poses two further issues for accountability researchers. The first is that optimistic appeals to reason can conceal that our moral predicaments are in a disastrous state. More fundamentally, attempts to reach conclusions ‘by means of reasoned arguments’ can further obfuscate the depth of the moral dilemmas. It was for these reasons that this paper returned to debates concerning the role that language might play in disclosing new avenues for society to follow.

Again, the paper follows Francis (1994) in positing a role for accountability research to extend the accounting ‘due process’ by considering the common goods that shape people’s significant claims. The focus is to create and maintain the highest standards of accounting, governance and political morality. A need exists to determine how these standards will remain in force, remain impartial and promote rational discourse. It was for these reasons that Taylor concluded his analysis of Habermas’s ethic with the following observation. He stated:

[Indeed, at the end of this paper, rather like at the end of an episode in one of the serialized adventure stories of my youth, the hero is left hanging over a cliff, about to plunge into the abyss, to the mocking laughter of the post-modernist fiends. The question is, how to rescue him, both normatively and in historical fact? (Taylor, 1999, p. 1).]
This paper concurs with Taylor and argues that universal methods to adjudicate discourse ethics must be explored from another perspective. The work of Francis (1994) and Shearer (2002) are an example of accountability research that dissociates instrumental reason from the dominant logic of economics. At the very least, it represents a different pathway on which to base accounting.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Habermasian thinking has offered important insights for accounting and accountability purposes. His work on language theory provides a means to bring about change in civil society and whether language does more than designate meaning. This paper has offered a different way to think about language as a medium through which ideas, nuances and meaning unfold as conversation proceeds.

It was argued that Habermas’s universal linguistic strategy is appealing to accountants in that it offers a way to test whether maxims are either valid or invalid (true or false). Yet, language can be probed from an entirely different perspective to borrow Charles Taylor’s phrase. This phrase was used by Taylor in his work on extending Gadamer’s argument that language is not exhausted by procedure: rather, it offers a means to create richer interpretations and thereby broaden horizons. Language, like life itself, can never be reduced to procedure and rule driven principles of rational calculation. A broader vision presented as it is by our language abilities has the potential to illuminate middle-range accounting. That is, language is not a tool at the hands of any one interlocutor, but reflects interpretation, nuances and ambiguities that make up the world. Through conversation and dialogue we may clarify ideas, values and the maxims which confront people. In this way it is possible
that accountability research contributes to solutions to problems associated with difference and diversity.

A central supposition of this paper has been that Gadamer and Taylor both share a perspective that problems emerge when Habermas separates ethics from morality, truth from rightness, and interpretation and scientific precision. These issues have implications for Habermasian inspired middle-range writers who focus on pragmatic change, public sector reform, managerialism, performance measures and key performance indicators. This led to the argument that rule-procedure over interpretation reflects Habermas’s assumption that a democratic system assumes that in allowing people to assert facts they will be transformed by the force of the better argument. This central Habermasian assumption was seen to be problematic in that measuring up to a set of rules like those expounded by Habermas miss the point that reconciliation and transformation involves a process of enrichment, engagement and dialogic interaction.

For accountability purposes, Habermasian reforms must be examined through a dialogic lens to express the limits of a procedural modus operandi. In contrast, Gadamer and Taylor offer a dialogic model which engages with others who are different. A fundamental claim was that their thinking exposes the illusion that words and language function as tools that can be controlled and measured. Rather, it is humanity’s capacity to express thoughts through language which offers a richer way to analyse the world. This way of thinking, in turn, impacts on accounting and reporting functions. This cannot be achieved when language is constrained and reduced to a tool at the disposal of interlocutors who must abstract from their reality to test the validity of their maxims. Yet, language does not function as a precise and austere instrument at our control. We do not have complete mastery over the
structures of language and communication. Indeed, recent Haberamasian research has warned that we must be wary of most of language’s uses. A problem is that accounting and accountability research might succumb to the dominant forces of conservatism; namely, rational choice accounting (RATS). More fundamentally, the aims of normative accounting theory as proposed by Abraham Briloff, Ray Chambers, and Edward Stamp among others may be lost.

Future research might consider that the task of accounting is not to just follow the rule but to give public ‘voice’ to the concerns of critical accounting an increasingly important, but unfortunately marginal activity. Implementing this broader way to think about language does not diminish this need. A final point is encapsulated in Habermas’s famous statement ‘that the rose in the cross of the present may have grown pale, but it is not yet completely faded’ (Habermas, 1999).
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