Abstract

In this paper I intend to critically examine the use of humour and irony as devices for identity constructions. Irony is cautiously thought about as one of the major tropes in rhetoric theory. In rhetoric theory, different twists used in poetry and literature have fostered considerable interest as a way to handle ambiguities and paradoxes in everyday situations. Through ‘ironic poetry’ it is possible to create the crucial oscillation between different perspectives. An ‘ironist’ can raise radical and continuing doubts about the vocabularies in use whilst at the same time formulating new vocabularies. Paradoxes and ambiguities seem to be weeds in the modern organisation since they do not fit into the classical analytical frame of reference. However, new rhetorical attempts have demonstrated in a variety of ways how paradoxes and ambiguities are needed in order to understand what is going on in organisations. When bracketing and punctuating along the stream of events, people use paradoxes and ambiguities as discoveries. And through irony and humour these discoveries can be sufficiently treated in a reflexive manner.

This paper depicts a story about business counselling services provided for women as entrepreneurs in Sweden. Such a network of business counsellors all over the country operates with the aim of promoting female entrepreneurship. Contact, communication and dialogues in these relationships between different business counsellors nationally construct learning about entrepreneurship, and about how to organise the counselling process. However, the exchange of stories between different business counsellors tells no single story of reality. Instead, many stories are constructed; and it seems to be of special interest to investigate how humour and irony stimulate reflexions concerning the interference among vocabularies in use.

The use of the humorous connection has a serious purpose. Humour and irony can be used to reach reciprocal understanding of differences in vocabularies and a way of saturating the research inquiry. Furthermore, in this case it seems necessary to combine that effort with a critical account especially articulated through a gender perspective. Emphasis should be laid on the contextualization of gendered patterns of interaction in the widest sense if we are to reflect critically on identity constructions interwoven between people and society. Consequently, the paper’s ambition is to go beyond dichotomised comparisons between genders. Instead, it is argued that the social construction of reality is transmitted in a reflexive form where self-reflexion is increasingly necessary, irrespective of gender demarcations.
**Introduction**

This paper tells a drama about business counselling services directed towards female entrepreneurs in Sweden. A network of business advisers all over the country operates for the promotion of female entrepreneurship. Contact, communication and dialogues in these relationships between different business counsellors nationally construct learning about entrepreneurship and about how to organise the counselling process. However, the exchange of stories between different business counsellors tells no single story of reality. Instead, many stories are constructed and it seems to be of special interest to critically examine how humour and irony are used as devices in the work situation (see Johansson & Woodilla, 2000 and Wahl, Holgersson & Höök, 1998 for reflexions on humour and irony in organisation studies). But let us first listen to the expressive account of one business counsellor.

**The voice of one business counsellor**

Susanna describes her everyday work situation as a flow of events where her work identity is to personify a form of ‘mentor’ during the encounters with potential entrepreneurs. This counselling situation seems to require listening and understanding capabilities.

“The potential entrepreneur speaks about the dog that cannot be alone, about the food that needs to be bought, and about the caring, cleaning and washing that need to be done at home. Private life and work life are intertwined and the prerequisites for business life need to be tailored from person to person. My role as a business counsellor is to develop understanding for the whole life situation…” (extract from an interview with a business counsellor).

We can immediately identify an important condition for this kind of counselling situation. It is a perspective that crosses the border between private life and work life and it demands reflexions on what kind of devices this perspective causes. The Russian literary scholar Bakthin (1928/1985) claims that devices are at the same time more vague and more specific than a method. Devices promise artfulness and instrumentality at the same time and it can be idiosyncratic. In the borderland between private life and work life this kind of perspective on devices for identity construction seems promising. Opening the border between private and work life also calls for descriptions that include nuances, paradoxes and ambiguities in different life situations. In the search for more colourful descriptions that mediate non-reductionistic views of life dramas, new rhetorical perspectives are called for.

Nevertheless, Kenneth Burke seems to provide us with one example of dramatism through his theory of the dramatistic pentad: act, scene, agent, agency and purpose – which corresponds respectively to the what, the where the when, the who, the how and the why of all the utterances. With the integrating question: “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” he starts his intriguing research in the book “A Grammar of Motives” (1945/69). The perspectives studied in his work (see also Burke, 1950/69) likewise create bridges between classical rhetoric (see for example Kennedy, 1991 in the book “Aristotle on Rhetoric”) and the new rhetoric primarily articulated by Chaim Perelman (see Perelman, 1979/90; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958/69). However, if Burke focuses on the transformation of identities in a non-reductionistic manner through his dramatistic pentad, so does Perelman concentrate his
efforts on the transference of ideas and argumentation. In view of this fact it seems enriching to compare the works of Burke and Perelman in order to see how their ideas are complementary.

New rhetoric for completed human reasoning

Kenneth Burke and Chaim Perelman appear to be influential thinkers on rhetorical theory, which has affected scholars in many different disciplines. A common denominator is that they leave behind classical rhetorical analyses and move the rhetoric research into comprehensive analyses of what it actually means to be “social”. Rhetoric research extends to a certain epistemology that incorporates the complexity of human reasoning (Müllern & Stein, 1999). The new rhetoric problematises the communicative and linguistic aspects of human dialogue and aims to illustrate joining aspects of paradigmatic (model-like) and syntagmatic (story-like) elements in communication (Czarniawska, 1999). However, even if we can find similarities between Burke’s and Perelman’s reasoning, we can also find reasoning that differs in certain ways. Fisher and Brockriede (1984) argue that Perelman rejects Burke’s linguistic realism and instead claims that language is an instrument rhetoricians use in their attempts to gain adherence. This distinction appears to be in line with Perelman’s focus on argumentation that we mentioned earlier. With Perelman’s focus on argumentation follows contextualisation, and in what way the audience can be accounted for.

“The part played by the audience in rhetoric is crucially important, because all argumentation, in aiming to persuade, must be adapted to the audience, and hence based on beliefs accepted by the audience with the conviction that the rest of the discourse can be securely based upon it.” (Perelman, 1979/90:1087)

The interaction between the narrator and the audience, and consequent reciprocity, place sensemaking aspects in focus (cf. Weick, 1995). The narrator in this rhetorical context is not concerned with mediating ‘facts-as-information’ but with mediating ‘facts-as-experience’. She or he wants to engage with its meaning (Gabriel, 2000). This perspective raises questions about critical moments in the sensemaking process: the sender’s motive; the content of the message; the form of the message; and, the receiver’s interpretations and reception capacity (cf. Müllern & Stein, 1999). McCloskey (1994) argues in this context for analysis of the whole rhetorical tetrad combining fact, logic, narrative and metaphor (see Figure 1).

Not only are facts and logic necessary for completed human reasoning; narratives and metaphors are also used in order to dramatise human interaction. That is to say that we develop understanding, not exclusively through logical reasoning and through narrowing down our arguments in the name of rationality. Moreover, we attempt to persuade each other with other forms of interactions as well. The right-hand side in Figure 1 emphasises symbolically-charged narratives and metaphors as complementary ways to sensemaking. McCloskey (1994) has shown that even science uses the whole rhetorical tetrad in order to persuade; and he emphasises that fragments of the tetrad are not enough for full thinking. Cutting the argument the other way around, the four devices can also be used as a way of deconstructing a field of knowledge. This
theoretical perspective relates to the empirical situation focused in this study in an appropriate way, where the female business counsellors work with deconstruction and reconstruction in the field of knowledge concerning entrepreneurship. They try to unpack taken-for-granted meanings through critical examination of standardised behaviour, and at the same time create new fields of argumentation, both locally and nationally.

Fields of argumentation and identity constructions

In 1993 The Swedish National Board for Industrial and Technical Development (NUTEK) initiated a project with the overall aim of promoting female entrepreneurship preferable in the rural districts of north Sweden (Nilsson, 1996). This initiative was followed up in 1997 by a similar project in the southern part of Sweden now also supported by the European Union (its activities were chosen as one of the best practices among the employment pact of 1999). Altogether over 100 female business advisors of this special category operate all over the country today. The network that these business advisors personify includes meeting at least twice a year in the capital of Sweden, Stockholm. During these meetings interesting dialogues between differing actors can be observed.

I had the opportunity to study the work of 23 female business advisors during a three-year period mainly in the southern part of Sweden. I also participated in the national meetings with the whole national network of more than 100 female business advisors. Through in-depth interviews, two questionnaires, participating observations at different physical arenas and through the dialogues developed within the intranet of the whole national network, I could follow the actions taken by these business advisors in promoting female entrepreneurship. One remaining observation was the need for reflexivity in order to reach reciprocal understanding both from the perspective of the business counsellor as well as from the perspective of the potential entrepreneur.

At the different meetings between the business counsellors, new rhetorical endeavours seemed necessary to use in undertaking reflexions on ambiguities and paradoxes experienced at work. This rhetoric is more open-ended, and tries to actively involve the participants in the construction process by critical reflexion. In these cases humour and irony function as liaison between different language worlds and helps the actors to develop critical distance to previously experienced problems as female entrepreneurs. In the presentation of the results I elaborated on the differences between vocabularies in use and laid emphasis on the difficulties of placing the counselling service in a special tradition or genre (Wåhlin, 2001). Instead, multiple and unconventional stories were common and no one-way solution could be distinguished.

Nevertheless, some configurations of the new rhetoric operated as an integrating mechanism and seemed to be necessary as interpretative lenses when analysing how different vocabularies interfere with each other (cf. Rorty, 1989). Different vocabularies can at first be seen as incommensurable but new rhetorical attempts accompanied with humour and irony make arguments negotiable and changeable, and thereby increases the possibility of satisfying contradicting needs. Latour (1993) argues that it is possible to blend incommensurates because we work so hard to keep them apart in the modern constitution. It seems important and interesting to elaborate on this paradoxical statement within this special context where mixtures between vocabularies are translated into new sets of practices and embraced identity constructions.
Breaking the silence

An embedded taken-for-granted notion of entrepreneurs made up of male characteristics seems to dominate the entrepreneurship discourse. Even if 25 percent of the Swedish entrepreneurs are women and 30 percent of the new-starters are women (Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communications, 2001), there seems to be a strange silence about the male domination in the entrepreneurship vocabulary (cf. Nilsson, 1997). Business counsellors studied try to break that silence by uncovering assumptions behind the vocabulary and the metaphors in use. They critically examine the dominating discourse through deconstruction of the vocabulary. Furthermore, they also invent a new vocabulary that builds on the knowledge of how vocabularies associated with masculinisation and feminisation interfere with each other. The business counselling services for women can be seen as a clear representation of tendencies enhanced by feminist movements. Such organisational attempts represent a search for identities that corresponds with individual needs and society needs in a new way. From a rhetorical perspective this means a turn or a twist compared with dominating discourses. This twist advocates redescriptions of old concepts by using a new – and even contradictory – language for the sake of replacing a worn-out vocabulary with a new one (Rorty, 1989).

“The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it.” (Rorty, 1989:9).

The major tropes as devices for communication in rhetoric (such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony) seem to be incomplete to cope with everyday contradictions and ambiguities experienced by business counsellors. They search for a new vocabulary articulated through diverse stories and metaphors. Gabriel (2000) argues that rhetorical tropes need to be complemented with ‘poetic tropes’ in order to interpret storytelling and communication in an extended way. He denotes that poetic tropes support particular interpretations that may be announced through, for example, a metaphor, an oxymoron, or a paradox. These particular interpretations can be reinforced through additional rhetorical, narrative and symbolic devices. With experiences from the business counsellors in mind I will add the humorous connection. Nevertheless, humour does not lend itself easily to definition (cf. Hatch & Erlich, 1993). It is much more readily demonstrated in small stories than described in a general way. But small practical jokes anyhow carry important cultural meanings. This perspective resonates for example, with Rorty’s (1992) claim that we need to question metanarratives, but at the same time continue to recount edifying ‘first-order narratives’. The business counsellor Kristina describes the diversity in her work situation as significant.

“There are no similarities between the companies and between the owners. All shape uniqueness and for those reasons every counselling situation is a specific event.” (extract from an interview with a business counsellor).

These multiple views, and thereby announced multiple identity constructions, dominate the national meetings in the network of business counsellors. Various and manifold stories presented with a (humorous) regional accent and dialect seem to dominate over similarities. Consequently, the encounters between business counsellors in the whole national network appear to portray management of multiple identity constructions characterised by a loose structure (Cheney, 1991). The emergent vocabulary is performative and calls upon engagement in the diversity of
entrepreneurship practices and processes. The loose structure leaves room for improvisation through listening to multiple voices. In this scenario, the leadership team at NUTEK acts as “film-producers” without control over the actors in the play. Although there exists a manuscript, it seems to contain high degrees of freedom. If we compare these meetings with a music performance, I think the metaphor of a “jam-session” in jazz can be used as a parallel. Hatch (1999) proposes that the jazz metaphor encourages us to reinterpret empty spaces as opportunities where each performance creates new beginnings. Consequently, jazz is more of a way to perform music than a specific genre. In fact, music experts have difficulty in classifying jazz as a specific tradition, and also in reproducing the music in musical notations.

In rhetorical terms this analogy with musical performance seems to compose some kind of ‘ironic poetry’ as a way to create the crucial oscillation between different perspectives. An ‘ironist’ can raise radical and continuing doubts about the vocabularies in use whilst at the same time formulating new vocabularies. On the other hand, the ironist is also well aware of the temporary and precarious nature of different vocabularies. Subsequently, the ironist finds the elixir of life on the boundary between vocabularies, and for that reason irony can be regarded as a way of handling multiple and contradictory realities. (Rorty, 1989). In my opinion, this gradual trial-and-error creation of a new vocabulary can also be compared with an author’s struggle with a manuscript. In the following sequence I work with an analogy of the Swedish author of books for children, Astrid Lindgren, and her construction of the super-girl Pippi Longstocking (see the analyses of the texts about Pippi Longstocking in the doctoral thesis by Lundqvist, 1979).

Criticising established views

The text of Pippi Longstocking incarnates a child’s dream of freedom, independence and superiority, as well as a critical reflection of ‘the grown-up world’. Such books seem to have the same influence for young girls as Simone de Beauvoir had for the feminist movement (de Beauvoir, 1949/1986) not least because of the literature’s metaphorical qualities. One of the 23 business counsellors studied in southern Sweden is located at Astrid Lindgren’s birthplace, Vimmerby. This idyllic small town and its surroundings are where the author collected inspiration for the books about Pippi Longstocking. During my field studies at this place, various scenes from the books were run through (see the homepage developed by one of Vimmerby’s web-entrepreneurs with the heading “Astrid Lindgren’s World” at: www.turism.vimmerby.se).

Such features, combined with the interesting analogies that could be noted between texts about Pippi, and the work of promoting female entrepreneurs made the decision to choose this analogy straightforward in the presentation of the results. Comparisons could be made, for example, between her way of describing relations between ‘children’s worlds’ and ‘grown-up worlds’ and those texts that describe relations between ‘female worlds’ and ‘male worlds’ (see Wåhlin, 2001). Metaphorically, Pippi is a real female entrepreneur and she seems to use irony and humour simultaneously as an important cornerstone in her storytelling. The tales told in such books are manifold and often ironic, and the texts can be seen as a set of examples of an unusual pedagogy that challenges existing norms in upbringing. It is also interesting to see how these books meet the same demand today as they did 55 years ago (the books have sold over 80 millions copies, and have been translated into 76 languages).
Likewise, literary experts encounter the same problems with classifying the books about Pippi Longstocking into a specific literary genre as music experts have in classifying jazz into a particular musical genre. Both expressions seem to blend different genres and invent new combinations that can also be seen as invitations for the reader or the listener to participate in the play. For that reason the metaphorical power of these examples seems to be strong in inviting improvisation and participation. It is more metaphorical than literal (in line with musical notations).

Lundquist (1979) claims that the text about Pippi rather affords a counter-genre than being part of tradition. Whilst the stories about Pippi often start from conventional patterns and motives, she subsequently turns them upside down. With this twist, she creates a language community for the audience that opens up to different improvisations that harmonise in their struggle for a position of enhanced freedom. Pippi Longstocking is quite the opposite of the “ideal Swedish girl”. She is anything but beautiful with her red braids that stick out, her potato nose, and her freckles. She is wild and wears clothes that neither match nor fit. Worse still, she lacks manners. She is loud and assertive – she is both seen and heard, and knows what she wants. This wild redhead who lives alone with a monkey and a horse in a ramshackle old house fed readers’ dreams of sovereignty and their desire for power and independence.

“Her hair, the colour of a carrot, was braided in two tight braids that stuck straight out. Her nose was the shape of a very small potato and was dotted all over with freckles. It must be admitted that the mouth under this nose was a very wide one, with strong white teeth. Her dress was rather unusual. Pippi herself had made it. She had meant it to be blue, but there wasn’t quite enough blue cloth, so Pippi had sewed little red pieces on it here and there. On her long thin legs she wore a pair of long stockings, one brown and the other black, and she had on a pair of black shoes that were exactly twice as long as her feet. These shoes her father had bought for her in South America so that Pippi would have something to grow in, and she never wanted to wear any others.” (extract from one of the books about Pippi Longstocking).

The author works intensively with contrasts in her texts. When Pippi moves into the house next door to the “Swedish model children – Tommy and Annika” she brings excitement, adventure, and a hint of revolt with the aim of rethinking gender roles into the rather mundane and boring middle-class life in this small Swedish town. With her ultimate refusal to grow up and adapt, Pippi also set the stage for female heroes in children’s fiction who would break down the narrow limits prescribed by tradition and change the viewpoint of many readers. Feminists that grew up with Pippi Longstocking in their bookshelves recall how this reading experience changed them and how Pippi became a cradle for female assertiveness (Metcalf, 1995). This female assertiveness also inspires female entrepreneurs continually and the latest example in Sweden is “Ms. Freckles” in Stockholm (a modern grown-up Pippi Longstocking).

**Blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality**

Ms. Freckles was founded in August 1999. Three female entrepreneurs started a web company with the aim of becoming a meeting place for the mobile professional women between the ages of 20 and 45 years. By offering a lifestyle concept attracting the mobile professional women with simplification procedures, career advising, entertainment, and professional relations, it was assumed to reach break-even by mid-2002. However, during the crisis for the dotcom-industry, no further risk capital could be generated and the company was gradually forced to enter a
compensation agreement. In the company’s business plan the metaphoric inspiration from Pippi
Longstocking was clear where women with ‘freckles’ were assumed to characterise an attitude of
independence, strength, and open minds to people and modern technology.

“Our target group was the modern and free-thinking woman who dares to push the envelope,
question authority, and who doesn’t conform to traditional women’s roles” (extract from an
interview with one of the founders).

The company also started an animated net-comedy about the 34-year old modern
businesswoman, Ms. Freckles (also sold to television companies). The story was built around her
work at an Internet Company (SuperDuperAnythingGoes.com), her friends and her family. New
three minutes’-episodes were launched every week and these episodes were combined with a
daily diary. The stories told were built with a humouristic touch and the characters represented
values that the target group in some way could identify with. Nevertheless, the business reality of
the new economy reached the company, and the translations from Pippi Longstocking to Ms.
Freckles arrived at an end.

The thin line between humour and seriousness

It is worthwhile to mention that nobody from the studied network of female business counsellors
was involved in advising Ms. Freckles. Instead, many of them voiced scepticism and criticised
the naive tone of the project. Especially the business counsellors in the southern and northern
parts of the country indicated the Stockholm-centered articulation of fictitious business concepts,
stimulated by fashion and mimetic behaviour at that time in the IT and media industry. However,
it is difficult to analyse all the reasons for why the business idea failed. Accompanied by the
wide-ranging decline in the dotcom-industry the founders also mention the problems with
explaining the business idea with a “proper” vocabulary for potential (male) risk capitalists.
Despite all other reasons (I cannot be the judge), the character of Ms. Freckles seemed to
characterise a narrow translation of the metaphorical and textual qualities expressed in the books
about Pippi Longstocking. Especially the critical and ironic positions articulated in the books
seemed to be underestimated. The ideas were rather copied in a commercial and simplified way
instead of opening up for alternate interpretations. The founders of Ms. Freckles who had the
ambition to make the childlike Pippi Longstocking mature and popularised, took away many of
the witty literal qualities. And Pippi’s critical voice was transformed into that of a marionette in a
soap opera!

Furthermore, this case also raises discussions about the thin line between humour and
seriousness. In some way we seem to assume that there is a single and coherent economic logic
behind serious businesses (compare the left-hand side with the right-hand side in Figure 1). This
epistemological position stimulates simplifications along with what kind of vocabulary that is
accepted as serious (Johansson & Woodilla, 1999). However, my intent is instead to show how
complex is the relation between humour and seriousness. For that reason we try to move beyond
bipolar thinking, and consider irony and humour as one of the major rhetorical tropes that can
incorporate paradoxical meanings. When bracketing and punctuating along the stream of events,
people use paradoxes and ambiguities as discoveries; and through irony and humour these
discoveries can be treated in a reflexive mode.
When we move from irony as a preservative device to irony as a liberating device, strong forces are mobilised accentuating the border between humour and seriousness. As long as irony and humour represent a small discursive community, it seems to be perceived as harmless; but when it is considered as a liberating force the champions of seriousness make their voices heard. Most dictionaries also relate irony to a simple difference between what is said and what is intended. But if we take into account irony and humour as an important rhetorical trope, the ‘ironic poetry’ can raise radical resistance against vocabularies in use. In the study of the business counsellors I could identify doubts against the economic logic and its large-scale, global, competitive implications. This is not least true at the meetings with the whole national network of business counsellors where clearly this resistance was articulated. Such articulations seem to shape the same qualities as Castells (1997) describes when he talks about project identities.

“Project identities: When social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural material are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of the overall structure. This is the case, for instance, when feminism moves out of the trenches of resistance of women’s identity and women’s rights, to challenge patriarchalism, thus the patriarchal family – and therefore the entire structure of production, reproduction, sexuality, and personality on which societies have been historically based.” (Castells, 1997:8).

These identity constructions are different life expanding projects towards the transformation of society in order to prolong these identity constructions. The latter build on what Castells calls “communal resistance in the globalised information age” (Castells, 1997:65-67). Consequently, these perspectives raise doubts about the fundamental prerequisites in economics logic and for that reason they try to break the boundaries between private and work life through articulations of new vocabularies. The strength and vitality of the feminist movement lies in its diversity and its adaptability to different cultures (cf. Calás & Smircich, 1996). Therefore, it is difficult to find similarities that are shared across feminist movements. All descriptions and categorisations tend to be reductionistic and not able to outline the inductive polyphony and multiplicity that different feminist movements frame.

**Different positions exposed by feminist movements**

Even if categorisations can be reductionistic, they can fulfil pedagogical purposes and outline different lines of argumentation. Calás & Smircich (1996) distinguish between seven different feminist approaches in organisation studies (liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, marxist, socialist, poststructuralist/postmodern and third world/postcolonial). The evaluative summary of these approaches shows the extended agenda for feminist studies.

“…it’s not only about ‘gender’ anymore, as both women and men from the First and Third Worlds, employed and unemployed, with and without families, struggle with inequality, injustice, inequity and intolerance.” (Calás & Smircich, 1996:236).

This outgrowth seems to correspond with developments in the project of critical management studies. Alvesson & Billing (1997) create bridges between these research areas and they see gender studies as one of the attempts to expose and reverse the work of mainstream management theory. With a more narrow focus on management studies (compared to Calás & Smircich’s
classification) the authors suggest a distinction between four approaches (see Figure 2 adapted from Alvesson & Billing 1997: 171).

The four positions the authors explore compose a matrix, one dimension of which is an emphasis on gender similarity or on gender difference. The other axis is an ethical/political concern and a concern for organisational efficiency. The four approaches are: 1) equal opportunities (emphasis on gender similarity, ethical/political concern); 2) meritocracy (emphasis on gender similarity, concern for organisational efficiency); 3) alternative values (emphasis on gender difference, ethical/political concern); 4) special contribution (emphasis on gender difference, concern for organisational efficiency). This matrix of four approaches helps us to understand different arguments on gender and organisations, and explains the possible failure of debates about the topic, since the four approaches build their arguments on different assumptions.

The authors claim that the equal opportunity perspective expresses a variable view, while special contribution and alternative values are respectively weak and strong applications of the feminist standpoint perspective. Meritocrats may not personify feminists at all, and if they are, the variable perspective is near at hand. The authors summary of this discussion can be related to the basic questions raised through the dramatistic pentad (act, scene, agent agency and purpose) mentioned in the beginning of this article (see page 2). The question of ‘Who?’ focuses on this paper’s perspective on female entrepreneurs and the question of ‘What?’ on entrepreneurship and management in its wide meaning. The ‘Why?’ question is, for example, answered by equal opportunity as a matter of justice. The meritocracy thinker’s answer for the sake of efficiency and the special contribution position with arguments about new progressive forms of entrepreneurship and management. The alternative value position does not argue for more female representation, but rather for more feminine ways of practising entrepreneurship and management.

Likewise the questions ‘Where?’ (where should female entrepreneurs and managers be located), ‘How?’ (is it possible to increase the number of female entrepreneurs or promote more feminine ways of organising), and ‘When?’ (when should female entrepreneurs and managers participate on the scene) be analysed with different arguments articulated by the four positions. Nevertheless, the argument raised in this paper is that the perspectives at hand can be used as ways to increase reflexivity about different identity constructions – both for participants and observers of gender relations. Analyses of these different positions can be combined with a critical stance that creates the crucial oscillation between different perspectives.

Reflexive identity constructions

This more profound form of identity construction beyond dichotomisation and bipolar thinking is rooted in a critical stance and incorporating the tensions of modern life. I call it reflexive identity construction and by using the word ‘reflexive’ I draw attention to the fact that people reflect upon life in different critical situations, and also that their reflexivity is revealed when they articulate their views in their interaction with others. This reflexive identity can also be described as a
bridge between the theoretical concept of ‘self identity’ and the concept of ‘social identity’ emphasising the continual re-definitions associated with identity constructions (cf. Lindgren & Wåhlin, 2001). With these re-definitions in mind we also reach the limits of epistemological positions and arrive at ontological questions. It is thus important to look beyond single organisational ideologies and individual careers and to attend to people’s basic values in life and in their ongoing interactions in different settings. A focus on the process of interaction underlines the reciprocal dependency between the self and the environment, and consequently draws attention to something beyond an exclusively self-fulfilment. Taylor (1989) asserts that:

"...our normal understanding of self-realisation presupposes that some things are important beyond the self, that there are some goods or purposes the furthering of which has significance for us and which hence can provide the significance a fulfilling life needs. A total and fully consistent subjectivism would tend towards emtpiness: nothing would count as a fulfilment in a world in which literally nothing was important but self-fulfilment. What is more, the primacy of self-fulfilment reproduces and reinforces some of the same negative consequences as instrumentalism" (Taylor, 1989, p 507).

Against this background it is important to examine the ontological character of identity construction through self-reflexivity. It could be argued that a more rigorous defence for reflexive theorising can be achieved by addressing these ontological assumptions and by explicitly articulating alternative sets of ontological prerequisites for identity constructions (e.g. the view of human beings, grounded assumptions of life). Giddens, for example, describes in a reflexive mode the importance of ontological assumptions when he discusses what he labels ‘ontological security’ which he defines as follows: “to be ontologically secure is to be confident in the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography (Giddens, 1991, p 53). Hence, we need to understand the life-history of the individual and the way every individual keeps a particular narrative going, rather than simply as the way they perceive their identity at any particular moment. Only then can we understand the multifaceted nature of the process of constructing identity constituted by its “becoming” as well as its “being”, thus also exploring the ontological dimensions of the phenomenon (Chia, 1996).

Consequently, the individual variations seem to dominate over similarities and it is important to thoroughly investigate the dynamics of multiple identity constructions. However, at the crossroads between work and private life, there seems to be some expressed ‘sameness’ that is articulated through the women’s narratives. Their narratives often express people’s ‘both/and existence’ that simultaneously incorporates both work and private life. This border is assumed to describe an artificial dichotomisation of the whole (ontological) life situation. Instead, narratives should mirror the complex ensemble of life situations and include reflexive dispositions to life as a whole.

These reflexive dispositions connect to the work situation for the business counsellors described in this paper. They seem to embody these kinds of reflexive identity constructions reciprocally with their clients. Hence, they act as ‘time pioneers’ in the no-man’s-land between work and private life through the construction of respectful gender relations and flexible working times (cf. Höning, Gerhard & Michailow, 1995). However, the exchange of stories tells no single story of reality. Instead they show plurality and envisage complementary perspectives that accomplish multiple identity constructions. If we again refer to musical metaphors we can say that
polyphonic sounds are articulated, and if we refer to textual metaphors, polysemic texts are inscribed and written. Nevertheless, the translations into action and acts of performance involve both centripetal (inward) and centrifugal (outward) forces (cf. Czarniawska, 1999).

Reflexive identity construction thereby focuses on the oscillation between similarity and difference. In other words the processes of feminisation develops in relation to the processes of masculinisation (Collinson & Hearn, 1996). And for these reasons are also reflexive inquiries irrespective of gender demarcations necessary. This comparative reflexion, on the edge between similarity and difference, raises basic questions at the core of identity construction such as: ‘Who am I?’, ‘What can I do?’ or ‘Why am I?’ When questions on the basic terms of existence catch the eye, it is usually argued that by travelling to other places we can acquire perspectives on ourselves and stimulate our reflexive capacity. Our encounter with a new environment generates reflexion and by humour and irony we can make “journeys” into another worlds that unmask the power relations around which social and organisational life are woven (Gherardi, 1996). We should not forget, says Bakhtin (1965/78) that “all the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people.” (Bakhtin, 1965/78:474). In the work of Rabelais, Bakthin distinguishes a great literary talent that transforms the linguistic dogmatism of the official culture into new and radical constructions, founded on a mixed culture with a variety of languages, dialects and forms.

Summary and conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss humour and irony as devices for identity constructions. Irony and humour was treated as one of the major tropes in rhetoric theory comprising twists in order to handle ambiguities and paradoxes in everyday situations. These twists embrace the crucial oscillation between perspectives, and create some forms of ‘ ironic poetry’. When bracketing and punctuating along the stream of events, people use paradoxes and ambiguities as discoveries, and through an ‘ironist’ position reflexive interpretations can be made.

The field study told of a drama concerning business counselling provided for female entrepreneurs in Sweden. Contact, communication and dialogue in these relationships between different business counsellors at the national level have constructed multiple identities and learning on how to organise the counselling process. However, the exchange of stories between different business counsellors told no single story of reality. Instead, many stories were constructed and it has been of particular interest to investigate how diversity has been used as a way of exchanging experiences between the actors. The reciprocal dialogue between the business counsellors and their clients is crucially important in this embodied new rhetoric. Through interactions they together externalise and internalise sensemaking and identity constructions that represent a particular feminist movement. Furthermore, the actors in the network try to dissolve dichotomisations between feminisation and masculinisation and instead embrace reflexive identity dispositions with respectful and complementary gender relations.

These multiple identity constructions need new rhetorical attempts in order to be articulated. The whole rhetorical tetrad needs to be completed with fact, logic, narrative, and metaphor. Moreover the dramatisation of the entire entrepreneurship perspective needs to be articulated through new narratives and metaphors that do not exclude female participation. These narratives and
metaphors for a new belonging challenge the masculine domination in current entrepreneurship discourses.

Work as a business counsellor comprises ambiguities and paradoxes. One way for them to create the critical distances needed to handle these dualities is in using irony and humour. Irony and humour can be used to reach reciprocal understanding of differences in vocabularies and a way of saturating the research inquiry. Furthermore, in this case it seems necessary to combine that effort with a critical account, especially articulated through a gender perspective. Emphasis should be laid on the contextualisation of gendered patterns of interaction in the widest sense if we are to reflect critically on identity constructions interwoven between people and society. Consequently, we need to go beyond dichotomised comparisons between genders. Instead, it is argued that the social construction of reality is transmitted in a reflexive form where self-reflexion is increasingly necessary, irrespective of gender demarcations.

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References


Figure 1: The rhetorical tetrad

Figure 2: Four gender positions in management