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Intertextual networks in organizations:
The use of written and oral business discourse in relation to context

1. Introduction

How do actors in an organization succeed in sharing meaning? In many communication handbooks authors present an overview of all the ways in which employees can communicate with each other and their clients. Keuning (1991: 213-221), for example, considers that actors can communicate internally and externally, and use written and oral media. He also explains the difference between horizontal, vertical and lateral communication. It is curious to see, however, that there is little empirical evidence on how actors really communicate. Of course, it is difficult for researchers to get permission from companies to do research in actual communication inside their organization. Firth (1991: X) suggests the main reasons for companies for refusing to collaborate are lack of time, no interest in the research and fear of intrusion into internal practices.

To gain an insight into the complex and dynamic process of business communication as a whole, it is important to refer to a corpus of actual business discourse, and it is also necessary that the corpus consists of both written and oral communication. This is because actors communicating with each other construct an intertextual network which is based on a sequence of actions and which consists of written and oral texts. They do this by using two intertextual dimensions, "tyings" (Firth 1991, 1995) and "cues" (Gumperz 1978, 1982) that are explored in this article. "Tyings" are utterances actors use to link their current text to prior and future written and oral texts in order to create what may be referred to as "sequential context" (Loos 1997: 48-52). "Cues" are signals, for example intonation in oral texts and underlining in written texts, that enable actors to create what may be referred to as "cultural context" (Loos 1997: 53-57) in order to inform each other of what is going on. Considering their discourse from an intertextual angle allows the reconstruction of the ways in which actors in organizations use written and oral texts to share meaning.

Paragraph 2 shows how tyings and cues enable actors to construct an intertextual network. Two case studies (Firth 1991, 1995; Loos 1996, 1997), in which written documents and audio-recorded data in international companies are analysed will be used in paragraph 3 to illustrate the "management of meaning" [1] by actors communicating in an organization. In paragraph 4 some conclusions are drawn and the implications for future research projects are outlined.

2. Constructing an intertextual network

2.1 Actor perspective

To analyse the use of written and oral business discourse in relation to context, it is necessary to adopt an actor perspective. *Human* (inter)action is the object of research in business communication. Boden (1994: 56) stresses that:

'Organizations do not *act* or *do* anything, people do. If we accept, at least as a working assumption, that organizations *are* the people who comprise them [2], then what we need is a far finer grasp of human action. Human activity is exclusively, and one may say irreducibly available through human action.'

Actors construct meaning by producing and interpreting texts. A micro-level analysis of text can therefore lead to a reconstruction of the ways in which actors use language to share meaning. Conversation Analysis (CA) is useful to do this. As Boden (1994: 203) suggests:

‘Conversation analysis provides an unambiguous method for careful observation (...), since the intersubjective accomplishment of meaning in interaction is readily available at the level of talk.’

CA originally focussed on the turn-taking system in conversations representing a finely geared "machinery" (Psathas 1995: 2), and institutional settings were therefore not included. Recently, however, more researchers taking a CA approach have been interested in talk-based work activities (Firth 1991, 1995; Boden 1994; Koole & Ten Thije 1994; Loos 1996, 1997, 1998 forthcoming). In paragraph 3 intertextual networks in organizations are reconstructed by adopting a CA perspective.

2.2 Tyings and cues as intertextual dimensions

2.2.1 Producing and interpreting written and oral business texts

If one wants to understand business discourse, it is necessary to focus on the patterns of actions that are constructed and followed by actors who interact by producing and interpreting written and oral *texts* in a specific situation. This view is supported by Fairclough (1992: 3) who suggests that:

‘This sense of "discourse" emphasizes interaction between speaker and addressee or between writer and reader, and therefore processes of producing and interpreting speech and writing, as well as the situational context of language use.’

By adopting an intertextual perspective, as Fairclough suggests it is possible to reconstruct how actors construct chains of speech communication by referring to both prior (already produced) and future (going to be produced) written and oral texts. Fairclough (1992: 101-102) mentions Bakhtin (1986) in order to make clear how actors constitute a text by using elements of other texts:

‘Bakhtin points to the relative neglect of the communicative functions of language within mainstream linguistics, and more specifically to the neglect of ways in which texts and utterances are shaped by prior texts that they are "responding" to, and by subsequent texts that they "anticipate". For Bakhtin, all utterances, both spoken and written, from the briefest of turns in a conversation to a scientific paper or a novel, are demarcated by a change of speaker (or writer), and are oriented retrospectively to the utterances of previous speakers (be they turns, scientific articles, or novels) and prospectively to the anticipated utterances of the next speakers. Thus "each utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication." (Bakhtin 1986: 89). That is, utterances - "texts" in my terms - are inherently intertextual, constituted by elements of other texts.’

Giddens (1979: 43) stresses that texts are constructed by "acting subjects" and he considers organizations as social systems that enable them to "bracket time and space" (Giddens 1987: 153; Boden 1987: 17). The systematic structuring of temporal and spatial dimensions can be seen as anchored in and articulated through oral texts, constructed in meetings and phone

calls, and by written texts, such as letters and faxes. Paragraph 2.2.2 explains how actors in organizations succeed in bracketing time and space by using tyings. Paragraph 2.2.3 illustrates that these tyings alone are not sufficient to share meaning, and that actors therefore also need cues.

2.2.2 Tyings creating sequential context

How do actors succeed in referring to prior and future texts? In paragraph 3.1 Firth's corpus demonstrates that they do this by actions which explicitly tie the printed mode (e.g. letters and faxes) to the current spoken mode (e.g. face-to-face and phone conversations) and vice versa. For this reason Firth (1991: 95) calls these actions tyings. Tyings like 'Thank you for the fax you sent me.' and 'Can you send us a fax to confirm this?', refer to prior and future written texts, and 'We refer to your phone call of last Friday.', and 'Please call tomorrow at 10 am' refer to prior and future oral texts. These tyings are examples of ways in which actors link their discourse to texts *outside* the current text in order to create sequential context (Loos 1997: 48-52).

Actors also create sequential context *inside* the text they are producing by turn-taking:

'It bears repeating that what is at issue for the achievement of mutual understanding and coordinated action is not resolved by reference to shared symbol systems which encode and decode the meaning and import of the talk. Instead, the resources for mutual understanding are found in the fundamental nature of sequencing - that the elements of interaction are not merely serially realized as "once and for all" but are rather actions that are *shaped* and *reshaped* over the course of the talk. The initiation of an action and the response to it create the immediate sequential context of these events, and occasions as well exhibits the participants' analysis and understanding of the unfolding course of the interaction. Mutual understanding is thus a methodical *achievement* employing the resources provided by the mechanisms of conversational interaction [3].' Boden & Zimmerman (1991: 10)

This sequencing of action means that the utterance of one actor is followed by that of another. The first utterance establishes the context for the second and the second confirms the meaning of the first (Goffman 1971: 149; Saville-Troike 1989: 153). Tyings enable actors to create sequential context. Tyings are one important intertextual dimension that enable actors to share meaning, cues provide the other.

2.2.3 Cues creating cultural context

According to Gumperz (1982: 131) cues are all those features of linguistic form that contribute to the signalling of contextual presuppositions. He stresses that actors who want to share meaning need cues [4] as signals to explain to each other what is going on:

'Channelling of interpretation is effected by conversational implicatures based on conventionalized co-occurrence expectations between content and surface style. That is, constellations of surface features of message form are the means by which speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and *how* each sentence relates to what precedes or follows.' (1982: 131)
'These contextualization phenomena tend to go unnoticed in everyday situations

although their effect is constantly felt. They are learned in the course of previous interactive experience.' (1978: 29)

Gumperz (1978: 23-24) provides the following examples of cues in oral texts; para-linguistic and prosodic cues, e.g. rhythm, pitch register, loudness and tone grouping, tonic or nuclear placement and tune, deictic pronouns, which are those pronouns that are interpretable only by reference to preceding utterances and interjections, such as yes and no, by which listeners signal their reactions to what has been said. Loos (1997: 56) suggests that in written texts cues can also be identified in the use of italics, underlining, lower-case letters, capital letters which allow writers to stress certain words or parts of a text.

By using cues actors refer to knowledge in a cultural model and create cultural context (Loos 1997: 53-57). This knowledge is continuously transmitted, for example, through dialogues with parents, brothers and sisters, friends, teachers, students and colleagues that take place at home, school and work. In other words, people acquire knowledge by experience, which is then transmitted in the course of dialogues and stored as "co-texts" (Loos 1997: 17, 53) in a cultural model. Actors need such cultural models, referred to as "frames" by Minsky, to know how to behave and communicate:

'A *frame* is a "data-structure" for representing a stereotyped situation, like being in a certain kind of living room, or going to a child's birthday party. Attached to each frame are several kinds of information. Some of this information is about how to use the frame. Some is about what one can expect to happen next. Some is about what to do if these expectations are not confirmed.' (1975: 212)

The term "frame" used by Minsky was first introduced by Bateson (1955). It is also used by Hymes (1974), Goffman (1974) and Frake (1977). Bartlett (1932), Chafe (1977a, 1977b), Rumelhart (1975) and Bobrow & Norman (1975) use "schema" and Schank & Abelson (1975, 1977) use "script". Despite the use of different terms Tannen (1979: 138-139) explains that:

'All these complex terms and approaches amount to the simple concept of what R.N. Ross (1975) calls "structures of expectations" that is, that, based on one's experience of the world in a given culture (or combination of cultures), one organizes knowledge about the world and uses this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events and experiences.'

Cues allow actors to signal contextual presuppositions to each other by referring to knowledge in their common cultural model, which then enables them to share meaning. It is important to stress that the knowledge in the cultural model to which actors refer does not prescribe the way they have to act; it delimits a range of options rather than specifying a single rigid pattern (Fairclough 1992: 127). Using cues to refer to this kind of knowledge allows actors to foreground certain aspects of background knowledge and underplay others in order to construct meaning (Gumperz 1982: 131). Giddens (1984: 86) explains that this construction of meaning by actors happens in situated interaction. He proposes the concept of "duality of structure" (1979: 53) which means that action and structure presuppose one another, i.e. structure is both constraining and enabling.

3 Data presentation and discussion

3.1 *Discourse at work during international negotiations by telex, fax and phone (Firth 1991, 1995)*

The examples given below are taken from Firth's corpus, which consists of written and oral texts that were produced and interpreted by business partners in Denmark and Saudi Arabia (Firth 1991, 1995). While Firth's intention is to demonstrate how these actors, by using tyings, refer to written documents like fax and telex as mutual reference points constituting a "purchasing sequence of actions" during their negotiations by phone, I intend to use his corpus to show how such actors construct an intertextual network by using tyings and cues to create sequential and cultural context respectively, which enables them to share meaning [5]. I will analyse a telex from Guptah (an importer working for the Saudi Royal Import Export Company in Saudi Arabia) to Hansen (an exporter from Melko Dairies [6] in Denmark) and their following conversation one day later by phone (Firth 1995: 152-153, 160).

Guptah sends his business partner Hansen a telex to let him know that he cannot agree with the selling prices Hansen offered him in the fax:

6749 ROYAL SAUDI, JEDDAH
DATED 20.3.90
MSG. NO. 976/90
ATT: MR. MICHAEL HANSEN

WE REFER TO YOUR TLX NO. PA077 DTD 16.3.90 AND VERY SORRY TO INFORM YOU THAT CHEDDAR WHITE/YELLOW PRICES QUOTED BY YOU ARE HIGHER THAN SELLING PRICES OF OTHER LOCAL IMPORTERS. WE THEREFORE REQUEST YOU TO PLS RECHECK ALL YOUR PRICES AND INFORM US BY RTN TLX SO THAT WE CAN CONFIRM OUR ORDER.

BEST REGARDS
7658 GUPTAH

By using a tying (WE REFER TO YOUR TLX NO. PA077 DTD 16.3.90), Guptah links a telex to a preceding one in which Hansen offered to him the prices for the cheese he wants to buy. He explains to Hansen that he can not accept his offer because his prices are higher than the prices offered by other local importers and he therefore requests him to recheck all his prices. Loos (1997: 37) suggests that while Firth convincingly demonstrates how these actors use tyings to refer to written texts like fax and telex as mutual reference points constituting a purchasing sequence of actions during their negotiations by phone, he makes little reference to the use of cues. The sentence INFORM US BY RTN TLX, for example, is not only a tying by which Guptah refers to a future text and creates sequential context, it is also a cue that creates cultural context.

This cue refers to knowledge of the organization as part of a cultural model that they share and makes clear to Hansen that Guptah still wants to continue the negotiation. Firth explains that the business partners use "a set of inferential expectancy principles" (1991: 75) in order to understand each other:

`The sender's selection of the telex to convey this message - coupled with his stipulation that the response should be made via "return telex" - is an indication that price revision is regarded as a relatively straightforward undertaking. More-

over, it is being seen as an *intra*-organizational undertaking, where the buyer's participation in the price-revision process is unnecessary. In implying that the resolution of the issue is an intraorganizational matter it may be argued that Guptah is attempting to minimize his non-alignment with the preceding offer; this he does by communicating his rejection of the offer via telex.' (1991: 93)

It is interesting to see how Hansen reacts to this telex. Although Guptah asks him to answer by telex, he uses the phone. Firth (1991: 93) suggests that the selection of the telephone mode over the printed mode occurs when one of the actors believes that a "conflict threshold" has been reached in the relationship and that direct *inter*-organizational activity is therefore necessary to avoid a breakdown in their negotiation. In other words, social and strategic utility of communicative mode selection helps the actors to share meaning.

Let me now present the transcript of the phone call [7] and analyse the use of tyings and cues in this oral text.

1 A ello?
2 H yes hello er saudi royal import export
3 company:?
4 A ye:s
5 H it's er michael hansen er melko dairies
6 speaking. (0.8 sec.) could I speak to mister guptah
7 please?
8 A moment
9 (17.0 sec.)
10 B allo:?
11 H yes hello er michael hansen melko dairies
12 speaking
13 B one minute
14 (4.0 sec.)
15 G hello?
16 H hello mister guptah (.) how are you?
17 G fine. (.) how're you?
18 H fine than' you (0.6 sec.) know now the summer
19 time has come to denmark as well
20 G ((laughing)) huh hh:eh heh ::hh
21 H so for: the:- us here in denmark it's hot
22 (.) it's twenty five degree, but for you it
23 will be- it would be cold (.) I think
24 G no, here in this er: forty- forty two
25 H yes?
26 (1.0 sec.)
27 G yes
28 H well I prefer twenty five. (.) it's better to
29 me
30 (0.9 sec.)
31 G yeah

32 (1.1 sec.)
 33 H GOOD er- I got a telex for er- from you
 34 (1.3 sec.)
 35 G yeah
 36 H you don' er: (.) accept our prices.
 37 (1.2 sec.)
 38 G for this cheddar
 ((continues))

Firth (1991: 97) shows how the exporter Hansen (H) in Denmark succeeds in making contact with his business partner Guptah (G) in Saudi Arabia. Hansen undertakes a series of what Firth calls pre-tyings. In lines 2-3 he seeks confirmation that he has reached the Saudi Royal Import Export Company; in line 5 he identifies himself to employee (A); in lines 6-7 there is a switch board request; in lines 11-13 he again identifies himself, this time to employee (B). In lines 16 and 18-19 there is some social talk. Firth (1991: 94) refers to Durkheim (1926) to explain that small-talk can be considered as "positive rituals" and he explains that these rituals are:

`the interpersonal gratification rites which affirm and support the social relationship between interactants. Such "rites" or "rituals" - which are largely omitted from the telex and telefax communications in the corpus - are most clearly identifiable as "small-talk" in telephone communications, and prototypically include exchanges on the topics of vacations, the weather, health and family.'

The pre-tyings in lines 2-3, 5-6, 6-7, 11-13, 16 and 18-19 finally allow Hansen to undertake the tying in line 33. Loos (1997: 38) suggests that the sentence `GOOD er- I got a telex for er- from you' not only allows him to link his current text to the preceding telex Guptah had sent him, it is also a cue for his business partner; Hansen makes clear that he wants to get down to business. The meta-linguistic marker `GOOD' that is preceded by a pause and is enunciated stressed with falling intonation (Firth 1991: 97-98) is also a cue; it is a signal for the hearer that important information follows.

3.2 Dutch-German communication at Parador (Loos 1997)

Loos (1997) conducted field research at Parador [8], a Dutch holiday centre in the Harz, in order to reconstruct the intertextual network of the communication between Dutch and German employees and guests. This research was based on several days spent at the company's headquarters in Amsterdam and a week spent at the holiday centre in Germany. In December 1994 fifty conversations were recorded at the Reservation Department in Amsterdam where Dutch employees interact by phone with German guests in order to make a reservation at a holiday centre and at the reception in the holiday centre in Germany where Dutch and German employees interact with German and Dutch guests.

Loos's research focuses on the management of meaning by the Dutch and German employees and guests at Parador. Transcripts of actual oral communication are referred to in conjunction with relevant written documents, to reconstruct the intertextual network that employees and guests construct together, by using tyings and cues, in order to share meaning.

The results of the research conducted by Loos (1997: 200-201) show that Dutch and German actors construct and follow sequences of actions which are part of a chain of actions related to the event 'staying in a holiday centre'. A guest phones Parador's Reservation Department in Amsterdam (oral text), the telephonist inputs data into the computer to make a reservation (written text), an invoice (written text) is sent to the guest who, after having paid, receives a receipt (written text), which he then shows at the reception desk in the holiday park (where the interaction is oral) in order to check-in appropriately. Complaining, asking for information and finally checking-out are other activities which are carried out by producing oral texts.

The following example given below is the transcript of a phone conversation [9] between a Dutch female telephonist (DTf) at the Reservation Department in Amsterdam and a German male guest (GGm) in Germany who wants to change his reservation. They start their conversation as follows.

/ \ / \
1DTf Guten Morgen Par- guten Morgen Parador Reserverungen. Sie
1GGm

 / \
2DTf sprechen mit Maria de Wit [10] Guten Morgen.

2GGm Ja Karl Schneider, guten Morgen. Ich hab' ne

 /
3DTf Ja.
 -
3GGm Frage und zwar ich habe eh Harz am dritten

4DTf Hmhm
4GGm dritten gebucht. Wollen Sie meine Reservierungsnummer

 / \ / !
5DTf Ja gerne. ja. ein- ein

5GGm haben? Neun eins drei acht

 \ /
6DTf Moment bitte Neun eins . drei acht ja
 / /
6GGm also Ja . drei acht drei zwei

 / / / - / /
7DTf Ja acht drei . ja und Sie haben eine Frage darüber?

7GGm acht drei.

The Dutch telephonist and the German guest identify themselves and greet each other in lines

(1-2) in German [11]. Then the German tells her in lines (2-4) that he wants her to ask something about a reservation in the Harz he had made for the 3rd: 'Ich hab 'ne Frage' und zwar ich habe eh Harz am dritten gebucht'. This utterance is a tying which enables him to link implicitly an *oral* text (a prior phone call), he had made to make reservation for a residential bungalow in the holiday centre in the Harz, to another *oral* text (their current conversation). In lines (4-5) he asks if the telephonist needs his reservation number: 'Wollen Sie meine Reservierungsnummer haben?' The utterance is a good example of the way in which actors are able to create sequential and cultural context by using tyings and cues as intertextual dimensions. By asking her this question this utterance is another tying which links the preceding *written* text (the booking that has already been made) to the *oral* text (their conversation) that they are producing together. Once this prior text as part of the chain of actions related to the event 'staying in a holiday centre' is activated by the tying, it is also a cue for the telephonist that the guest wishes to cancel or change his reservation. This demonstrates that cues are not only constituted by signals like intonation, but are also provided by utterances that refer to common knowledge related to the organization, stored as "co-texts" in a common cultural model. In line (5) the Dutch telephonist tells him that she in fact needs his reservation number ('Ja gerne. Ja.'). He gives her his reservation number in lines (5-7) which allows her to find in her computer the data related to his reservation. Then she asks him in line (7) what he wants to know and he tells her that he would like to arrive one week later.

8DTf

8GGm Ja, ich wollte fragen, ob ich 'ne Woche später kommen könnte.

9DTf - ! / - / *\
Eh eine Woche später? Oder, oder was?

9GGm / \
Geht das? Ja ()

10DTf Ich

10GGm Eine Woche. Also am zehnten wär's ja dann, ne?

/\
11DTf werd's mal sehen ein

11GGm vom zehnten bis zum siebzehnten.

/ - \
12DTf Moment hoor . ein {Harz} für zwei Personen

\
12GGm Hm

\ / - / \
13DTf Hmhm . . eh . . das ist kein . Problem . .

/\
13GGm hm.

In line (9) the Dutch telephonist checks if she has understood him well by asking him if he wants to come one week later: 'Eh eine Woche später? Oder, oder was?' The German

4. Conclusions and implications for future research

Which conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the written and oral texts in the research projects which were conducted by Firth and by Loos? Firth clearly illustrates that tyings enable actors to create sequential context. They refer to prior and future texts that are seen as mutual reference points which:

‘can be located or orientated to in order that the parties can inform each other of their state of progress, or, more generally, of their *interactional "whereabouts"*. (Firth 1991: 100-101)

In contrast to the findings in the first case study reported by Firth (1991, 1995), the Dutch and German actors at Parador in the second case study (Loos 1997) do not only refer to prior and future written texts, but also to oral texts. As a result, both written and oral texts can be viewed as mutual reference points, which actors use in order to inform each other of their interactional whereabouts. A second finding also not reported by Firth, is that actors do not only refer to texts which they produce themselves, they also link texts that they did not produce together to their current conversation, such as a calendar that they use to check a date for a reservation. A third difference is that Loos (1997: 17, 53) suggests that in addition to tyings, actors also use cues, where these cues can be viewed as signals, i.e. they refer to knowledge stored as "co-texts" in their shared cultural model, through which they create the cultural context that helps them to predict how to interpret each other's utterances in a specific interaction.

Actors construct and follow sequences of actions; by using tyings and cues as intertextual dimensions in their production of oral and written texts they create sequential and cultural context respectively. Constructing their intertextual network in this way allows them to share meaning. To gain more insight into this "management of meaning" requires future research based on actual documents, which focusses on the reconstruction of the process by which actors share meaning. According to Boden (1994: 18) actors share meaning during their interaction:

‘Meanings, most importantly, do not occur as isolated cognitive phenomena in the heads of atomized individuals; they are constructed *interactively* and under quite pressing conditions of time and space. The "need to know" has a for-the-moment quality that is irreducible to individual cognition; nor can it be abstracted away from the concrete actions and treated as an independent system.’

It would be useful to reconstruct how actors despite different cultural backgrounds and languages succeed in sharing meaning and to analyse the ways in which they use tyings and cues during their production and interpretation of both written and oral texts in their mutual construction of an intertextual network (Loos 1997: 219-229).

Notes

[1] Cf. Gastelaars & Hagelstein (1996) for research from the Centre for Policy and Management Studies of Utrecht University in the Netherlands in which "management of meaning" is the central theme.

[2] Cf. Weick (1969: 1).

[3] Garfinkel (1967: 38-42); Heritage (1984: 259).

[4] Gumperz (1978: 23-24) calls them contextualization cues and shows how actors with other cultural backgrounds use cues in different ways.

[5] Part of this paragraph was published in Loos (1996: 73-77).

[6] Melko Dairies is a pseudonym in order to protect anonymity.

[7] Cf. Firth (1991: XVII) for the transcript conventions.

[8] Parador is a pseudonym in order to protect anonymity.

[9] Cf. Loos (1997: 271) for the transcript conventions.

[10] The names of the actors in this transcript are pseudonyms in order to protect anonymity.

[11] Cf. Loos (1997: 139-142, 219-226 and Loos 1998 forthcoming) for more information about the language choice by actors international organizations.

[12] `Back-channelling (...) gives the speaker an indication that the hearer(s) is (are) still listening. It is intended to keep up the communication low by confirming or reacting to a preceding statement (...) and can be regarded as a "positive interruption", in fact as an encouragement for turn maintenance (...).' Clyne (1994: 110)

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