

***Unplugged* - Book Reviews Special Forum: Around the Communicative Constitution of Organizations perspective**

François COOREN (2015), *Organizational discourse*,
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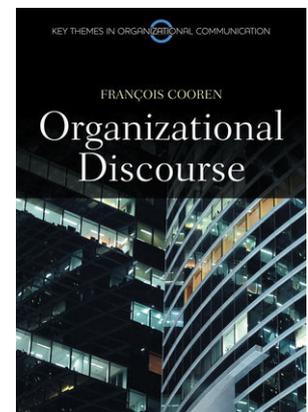
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The unplugged section edits some book reviews special forums dedicated to a topic, an author or a theoretical perspective. This second forum considers three important volumes gravitating around the communicative constitution of organizations perspective. Originated in a seminal contribution from one of our reviewers, Robert McPhee, who based his work on Giddens's structuration theory, this perspective experienced different avenues and forms now a "rather heterogeneous theoretical endeavor" (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Montreal School of organizational communication constitutes one of the main pillars of this perspective; James R. Taylor and François Cooren recently offered some stimulating volumes, carving out their own path within organizational communication studies. The CCO perspective has significantly disseminated in the field of organizing studies and an effective conversation henceforth unfolds with various discursive studies.



François Cooren's new book, *Organizational Discourse*, is a clear, well-informed, sensitive account of varied discursive approaches and topics in organizational studies. The book is, I would say, appropriate in difficulty for upper-level undergraduates or graduate students beginning in management and organizational communication. It assumes little student preparation in linguistics or sociology, and Cooren is very skilled and systematic about explaining technical terms and assumptions lucidly and with sustained examples. However, some prior exposure to sociolinguistic theory is more valuable than usual for increasing readers' understanding, since sophisticated issues lurk, often overtly but with limited and mainly common-sense elaboration, in Cooren's account. It is also worth mentioning that, while the book's special focus on discursive issues makes it most valuable as a text for courses concentrating on organizational discourse/communication issues, its breadth makes it a real option as a textbook, or a half-term text, in more generalized organizational behavior and communication classes.

Cooren is an important scholar in discourse studies and organizational communication, and is a primary exponent of what is commonly called the Montreal School of organizational communication theory. His book skillfully strikes a fine balance among three endeavors: general explanation of organizational discourse and communication-as-action issues, more focused exploration of the conception of the discursive constitution of organizations, and special use of actor-network-theoretic and Montreal School vocabulary, including his special interest in concepts of material, symbolic, and collective agency (and, not yet explicated but lurking, incarnation and ventriloquism). Though it covers the general organizational discourse terrain effectively, I found the implicit but straightforward presentation of the Montreal position, integrating various earlier theories that influenced it, very useful because it makes the unity of the position clear, eschewing obfuscatory tangents.

The book starts with a short chapter defining discourse and communication. Cooren distinguishes between “little-d” and “big-D” discourse approaches, with the former focusing on the “eventful character of conversation and interaction, [...] what people are up to when they communicate [...],” while the latter emphasize speech or writing as being “representative of a typical way of thinking or speaking about a given topic or question [...]” (p. 7). He goes on to discuss how nonverbal acts can “count as discourse”, and crucially defines discourse as constitutive of organizations when it is “how [they] not only work (or fail to), but also exist” (p. 12), that is, how they are brought into being or embodied.

In the second chapter, Cooren reviews six traditional perspectives, all of which provide templates that are at once theoretical and methodological, and were chosen because they give special attention to the constitutive power of discourse. Here, Cooren does not systematically develop the somewhat unique Montreal perspective but instead lets its main concepts (e.g., imbrication) emerge during the substantive analyses. This strategy is useful for displaying the path of emergence, and the utility, of Montreal School innovations. The perspectives are:

1. Semiotics, the initial perspective for this chapter, is defined as “interested in the functioning of signs” (p. 17) In emphasizing the performative aspect, Cooren arguably underemphasizes the extent to which semiotics has focused on typologies, articulating the different ways signs work. However, the emphasis on how signs work does allow him to develop one of his central themes, the argument that if signs work, they do things, are active, and thus agentive. Of course, people must interpret the signs, but Cooren posits that “these interpretations consist of recognizing what signs are doing” (p. 19; emphasis in original).

2. Rhetoric is defined as “the power of words or their capacity to make a difference in specific situations” (p. 22). Cooren emphasizes the power of rhetoric to define situations, and so to constitute them, by staging their interpretation in verbal forms like, for example, storytelling and narrative: “rhetoric focuses on how a specific discourse comes to stage what matters, what counts in a specific situation, whether it be facts, values, or principles” (pp. 25-26). But he follows Bruno Latour in analyzing the defining (and equally the constituting) of situations as determining “what or who is made to speak” (p. 24)—an even clearer move to link the realm of rhetoric to the concepts of agency/authority.

3. Speech Act Theory is the analysis of “how we do things with words,” as initiated by John Austin (1962). As part of a pretty standard account, Cooren emphasizes that speech acts “tend to be controlled by who is authorized to perform them, what is supposed to be said, and in what circumstances” but can have multiple, even unintended, consequences, and that they can go beyond defining situations (rhetoric) to be able to actually transform them, by altering the world to fit the implication of the act.

4. In a fairly conventional tack, Cooren combines ethnomethodology and conversation analysis to emphasize the power of conversants to co-orient with meaningful features of interaction. In particular, he explicates the reflexivity of conversation, wherein people regard a situation as meaningful in certain ways by displaying its meaning even as they are using the situation's meaning to guide their comments. Like a play that starts in *medias res*, we understand the nature of the situation at the same time as we understand the particular remarks that go on in it. It thus can count on the organization even while constituting it.

5. Narrative analysis emphasizes that understanding action requires a temporal contextual structure—that is, a narrative structure. This section delineates the properties that distinguish an intelligible narrative from a series of events, as well as the constituents of narratives (fully covered later in the text). Narratives tie the events, agents, and discourse of an organization together but Cooren also emphasizes that they are perspectival, often debated and renegotiated, and reveal evaluations that can orient the organization. But narrative analysis and the next perspective are very broad theoretic streams, and Cooren is forced to pick and choose specific concepts to develop, rather than having clear and consensual perspective groundworks from which to develop. In later chapters, Cooren introduces Algirdis Greimas' narrative theory, which is actually central to his treatment of examples, as well as focal in his ideas of organizational constitution. Frankly, at least some discussion of it belongs in this section.

6. Finally, critical discourse analysis is presented as postulating that unequal power relations can arise, not directly from strength or resource differences but more basically through the effects of large-scale Discourses that determine how people see their position in ongoing communication and consequently their relations to others. Cooren emphasizes the power of such communication to constitute people as subjects by leading them to recognize themselves in terms of, or subject themselves to, role relations and subject positions constituted in the Discourse. As people recognize themselves as the targets of, for example, insults, they are regarded as subjects who understand themselves to be possible, essentially, or deserving to be, insult targets. In the past, the Montreal School has been accused of neglecting power concerns; this section shows quite well how such concerns can be dealt with, in keeping with their premises.

Cooren's third chapter, the first about a classic organizational topic, examines a phenomenon that is often left implicit in textbooks about organizational processes: coordination. He argues that coordination must be "reflexively and incarnatedly enacted, mobilized, and made visible in people's conversation" and that coordinated systems are not self-propelled objects with a "harmonizing force" to ensure cooperation but instead need to be "performed into being [...] constantly reproduced and reaffirmed in interaction" (pp. 63, 66, 82). As in the next two chapters, this one systematically uses the six perspectives outlined above to analyze an example transcript, here a short interchange about dividing labor to pack and load a moving truck. On the face of it, the person moving, Julia, does the coordinating in exchanges like this: "Joey: 'OK, Julia, How do you think we should proceed?' Julia: 'Oh, I don't know. Why don't you and Patrick take care of bringing the boxes to the truck?' Patrick: 'Sounds good'" (p. 63). Here Cooren elaborates the Montreal School insight that authority and author both originate from the Latin *auctor*, "the creator, [...] the one who initiates, protects, and sanctions" (p. 70). This connection supports the analysis of communication as specially empowered to constitute organizations. Cooren notes that coordination is accomplished, not just by Julia's stipulation, but by the conversational sequencing and temporal dependence (termed *imbrication*) of speech acts proposing and accepting task roles, constituting authority as grounded in shared access to voice and thus shared consent. Cooren mentions, in line with critical analysis, that "it is not by accident" that the males are assigned more physically demanding roles in line with ideological gender stereotypes (p. 73). Perhaps

more space would have allowed Cooren to expand on the relations of rationality and ideology in organizations (for example, if the males really were stronger, is that sufficient reason to simply assign them the heavier tasks?). But the ultimate discursive perspective for coordination analysis is narrative theory as developed by Algirdis Greimas. Greimas' narrative approach argues that narratives are composed of specific stages and roles required to connect narrated events. Narrative analysis would present task division itself as a product of narrative reasoning, which organizes, contextualizes, and legitimates the acts and actors required to load the truck, thereby constituting the organizational structure. Julia is the "mandatory," the person mandating the task of moving, and thereby has a central position for negotiating authority. But she is also part of the group "acting for" herself as the mandator, a group constituted, by the interaction and the narrative, as a collective agent, a "we". Because she can speak "in the name of" this "we," Julia's discursive power to constitute the organization is reflexively completed.

The topic covered in the fourth chapter is an interesting amalgam: organizational culture, identity, and ideology. Cooren sees culture as a pattern of meanings, practices, and values that are cultivated (that is, "transmitted, sustained [or perpetuated], and inherited") in a specific group (p. 85). The idea of a trait sustained over time brings the culture conception in direct relation to his idea of identity, as specific characteristics that define an entity by making it "be or look the same throughout time and space" (p. 86). He states that an organization can "be conceived as a polyphonic or plurivocal entity [...] where many different voices representing various cultures and identities can be heard, even if some seem to count more than others" (p. 90). This view is aptly examined in Cooren's analysis of a case of concertive control—exerted by members of a team who have consented to a productivity norm and identified with it. The example is unusual as a prototype of cultural or identity discourse, since the dominant voice in the episode is the elected and pretty much formalized leader, who (accompanied by two other established team members) approaches a nonconforming team member to forcefully scold him about repeated misbehavior, not even letting him ascertain if a plurivocal account exists. It certainly illustrates maintenance of a group value and practice through the discourse of an authority, but is not the kind of informal, idiosyncratic, emergent practice to which the term "organizational culture" originally pointed.

The last substantive chapter of the book concerns meetings, which are not just loci for exchanges of information and arguments, decisions, and commitment, but episodes "intended to participate in and contribute to a larger process that gets invoked in and altered by what people are talking about" and thereby conversationally constitute and structure the organization (p. 114). The central example here is a meeting wherein the director of an African hospital and two agents of Doctors without Borders (DWB), who are partly funding the hospital, discussed an operational decision the director had to make. The choice was whether to leave half the professional staff at their posts during any one daily staff meeting, or have the meetings involve all staff while counting on family members to monitor patients. In probing the meeting transcript, Cooren is especially systematic in taking up each of the six perspectives on discourse and using them to analyze successive stages of the meeting while exposing deeper levels of meaning-context. To briefly summarize (reversing Cooren's order): critical analysis reveals several ideological oppositions at play: the young white DWB representatives vs. the older black director, norms of Western professional care vs. traditional norms of family involvement, professional structure vs. hierarchical authority-maintaining structure, and, most generally, Western influence vs. the appearance of colonialism. These polarities predominantly remain implicit until the conflict shifts from the staffing issue to focus on the director's capability to speak with authority about the best arrangement for his

hospital, and on the possibility that the DWB representatives are blameworthy for system problems developing, at least temporarily, a narrative of confrontation rather than integration. Yet, despite such polarities, institutional needs for cooperation, the legitimate power structure of the hospital, and the need on both sides to respect these constraints limit how overt conflict could become. The polarities and functional needs contextualize and influence the discursive tendencies described by other perspectives—personalized vs. indirect styles of stating arguments and making evidence claims, the move to position the system as the ultimate source of authority able to commit decision-influencing speech acts, even the choice of symbolic frames for describing time. (Arguably, starting with the critical discourse perspective might have made the political impact of the remaining discursive choices clearer.) Through these communicative options, the meeting crystallized the interests and tendencies of the participants while leaving grounds for polarizing decisions and future conflicts unsettled; Cooren is pretty clear that such results are the consequence of agency, by all three parties to the dispute, as well as their discursive patterns.

In this book, Cooren surely achieves his primary goal of recounting perspectives on discourse and showing how each enables insights that can be woven into larger accounts. In this, he succeeds in 170 pages rather than the 500+ pages that a comparably oriented work, Schiffrin's *Approaches to Discourse* (2005), takes. Of course, Schiffrin speaks to a different audience and works with more range and depth in covering and comparing her discourse approaches. But Cooren achieves remarkably thorough coverage of the central ideas of his perspectives, partly by showing key principles at work discursively enacting example organizational processes, while simultaneously showing how they correlate with his themes of agency and organizational constitution, and constructing a powerful argument for his integrated position.

That position briefly emphasizes that (a) discourse has the power to constitute communicative agents; (b) such agents are entities that have the power to “make things happen” discursively; (c) agents may include signs (including material objects), people (but as subject to discursive constraints), and collectivities; (d) human agents still have a special status since they, uniquely, can recognize the meaning of other agents; (e) agents can “speak for” or “in the name of” other (especially collective) agents, thereby constituting them; and (f) the web of agents interconnected in the communication process is, by that very fact, organized, but more importantly, the power of agents to do things in discourse is what makes organizational discourse work.

His argument is powerful, both because it integrates varied theoretical material into an interesting cohesive perspective and because it systematically draws interesting insights from increasingly complex examples. It also coheres with earlier work (e.g., 2000, 2010) that elaborates its fundamental insights.

I would say Cooren's presentation is sound, with minor reservations noted above. And Cooren builds his argument carefully, clearly, and credibly. However, despite respecting its thorough grounding, I must mention several concerns I have with Cooren's overall argument—concerns about emphasis related to issues that Cooren addresses explicitly, but subordinately and in passing. First is his emphasis on the agency of discourse, and of communities spoken for by, and thus constituted by, individuals, to communicatively “author” the organization. Ignoring, for brevity's sake, common arguments about humans' special nature as agents (partly because Cooren argues for his own position so well), I am concerned about the importance of human agents as, by their very words, constituting collective agents. Take the case of organizational culture. When Martha scolds Phil, violating norms of open discussion and rational problem-solving that might exist in the group, she might indeed be voicing an agreed sense that Phil is violating the norm of cooperative responsibility. But suppose she is taking a political stance about the rigidity of that norm, and using specific

supporters to try to impose it, despite the fact that her stance is not shared by the group, and Phil knows it. Then she manifestly would not be speaking “for the group” or constituting it, but making a political move masked by, for example, the word “we”—a political move that might be discussed, not supported, by the group, and contribute to the group’s disorganization. Now, Cooren explicitly agrees that words are contextually constrained and rely for their force on the interpretation of their receiver, and can have a disorganizing force. But a focus on the agency of words and groups may lead us to overlook the fact that interpretation is not just “recognizing what words do,” but evaluating the situational definition provisionally, arguably proposed by the speaker through the words, and reacting to it in argument, or silence, or by ignoring it, or through later debate.

That leads to my second concern, about the macro/micro orientation of the text. Cooren’s book does demonstrate, I would say, the importance of patterns of communication that produce/reproduce, transfer or share authority while achieving organizational outcomes. (Surprisingly, Cooren almost never refers to structuration or its exponent Anthony Giddens (1984).) But the concentration on authority has a drawback: it creates an emphasis on the author(s) and authority-laden communicative exchanges at the expense of the larger patterns, despite his definite statements that he wants his analysis to apply to collectivities broadly scattered in space. Indeed, going by the examples and the bulk of the discussion, we could argue that Cooren’s real claim is that the organization is talked into being face-to-face, and achieves univocal collective authorship, even of an organizational structure and a complex narrative plan. Thus, the coordination chapter analyzes an episode where Julia asserts informal authority by assigning task roles. Cooren does explicitly mention the variety of media and arrangements for coordinating a collective operation. But the impressive power and persuasiveness of his argument derives from Julia’s communication which, without being domineering, explicitly authors the coordination of an integrated task, to cover a group she is cooperating with, and thus creates a collective agent. But he does that at the expense of emphasizing the variety of choices, the multiplicity of sites, where the coordination of the whole group, over time, gets supplemented or departed from.

For instance, 30 minutes after her assignment of tasks, the men allocated to move boxes might find that the box loader is falling behind and might switch tasks on their own and move to help with loading. Indeed, Julia’s hesitancy and inclusive rhetoric, noted by Cooren (pp. 72–3), may communicate that her helpers are free to change their organization as needed (and as happens in every apartment move I have helped with). In other words, she may be abjuring authority, rather than subtly subjecting her helpers.

In a nutshell, Cooren is discussing, and should really tailor his account to, complex cases of what Mintzberg calls “direct supervision,” combined in the third example with “shaky alliance,” while neglecting the other mechanisms, most notably “mutual adjustment,” the one that is most “communicative” (1990, pp. 101, 243). “Adhocracies” are the form of organization where the dynamic, unadministered process of mutual adjustment is the prime coordination exercise. For these, the conceptual cluster of authority/author/collective agent/organization does not fit well. Essentially, there can be no one univocal authorial voice organizing or directing the interaction, and claims to be speaking for the group are less important than tentative or modifying proposals that abjure decisive authority. So employees characteristically do not make the kinds of authority claims illustrated well in direct supervision cases.

Moreover, the actual force, and proper interpretation, of Julia’s words depends on other processes occurring in various sites at unspecifiable distances from the face-to-face conversation. Discourse analysis of single face-to-face settings does not envelop the range of utility of discourse analyses of

organizational constitution, and often face-to-face processes are so embedded in less micro-level episodes that the episodes by themselves do not suffice to ground an explanation (McPhee, Myers, and Trethewey, 2006).

Cooren would presumably argue, validly, that authoring communication occurs in all of Mintzberg's mechanisms and in multisite processes, but insofar as that is so, the cluster of authority/author/collective agent/organization, as a theoretical resource, does not develop or explain the specific, distributed mechanics of organizing—the processes that are really demanding communicative accounts. As a mentor of mine repeatedly said, if one term (such as authority) constantly is focal in a general theory, it is actually the next distinction down that really matters.

That leads to my third concern: that in his emphasis on authoring and authority, Cooren presents an image of organization as univocal rather than polyvocal. This overlaps the argument made above, about authoring as essentially univocal. But my argument here is most directly engaged by the chapter on meetings, where the parties end up disputing, on one interpretation, the question of authority possession itself. The problem is that Cooren's example, excellent as an authority illustration, definitely shows different agents each claiming to be authoritative, first indirectly and finally quite overtly. But a meeting example like Cooren's could easily be polyvocal instead. The parties could be mutually adaptive, and the meeting could have another outcome, for instance if the group discussed the problem and generated a decision—perhaps to do a study of the range of situations where professionals defer, initially, to the treatment options suggested by families, to see how often their suggestions lead to dangerous problems. The study results might “represent” the hospital or the group in some way, but the solution might be generated without anyone defensively invoking formal authority.

These concerns, I think, do not undermine my general impression of Cooren's book, both as a valuable and insightful theoretical integration and exposition and as a lucid, broad-ranging textbook.

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