An Analysis of Language and Culture in the VOA: Outline of Methods

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Valuation Office Agency

Introduction

Discourse analysis offers a way to develop a robust understanding of the connection between language and organisational culture, and its role in promoting or hindering change. By examining the language used within an organisation it is possible to identify the assumptions that underlie different types of communication – both formal and informal – and map the powerful links between language and the way an organisation functions and develops.

Discourse analysis and its role in organisational culture

This section sets out briefly the overall approach we take in working with organisations, which draws on the range of academic approaches to language known as 'discourse analysis'. A 'discourse' can be defined as 'a particular way of talking about and understanding the world, or aspect of the world' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2009); we might also say it is about the deep connection between language and thought. Discourse analysis treats language not as a transparent, neutral medium through which we describe a fixed reality, but as *active* in establishing and maintaining that reality. That is, the language we use, and how we use it, creates our social world - this is not a trivial matter but it has real, material effects. Here are some key ideas:

- our knowledge and representations of the world are not reflections of a reality 'out there' but are products (or social constructions) of our ways of categorising the world
- these categorisations and representations are historically and culturally specific – they shift over time and vary across cultures and subcultures
- discourse is a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world including knowledge, identities and relations between people, and in maintaining social patterns and indeed relationships of power
- within a particular world view, some forms of action are treated in discourse as 'natural' and inevitable, and some not - and this is a powerful social force.

Discourse analysis is useful in organisational research and consulting, and especially in supporting change, because language can act as a sensitive indicator of the existing and lived 'culture'. That is, the internal discourse of any organisation – the everyday shared language too familiar to be 'heard' by anyone except new joiners – both contains *and* upholds taken-for-granted and unspoken ideas of 'who we are, what we do and what matters round here'.

About this report:

This paper explains how discourse analysis was used by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) in two phases of work in 2014/2015.

The work focussed on the role of language in both reflecting and in shaping culture, and the practical changes that could be made in order to support future organisational development.

The paper first describes the principles and methods of applying discourse analysis to such issues, then sets out how this analytical and practical approach was applied to answer the VOA's own research questions and business needs.

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The sum of such ideas – sometimes known as 'culture' - is one of the most commonly talked-about managerial and leadership issues, and is recognised as being linked to long-term business success (Deal and Kennedy 1982; Schein 1999, 2004; Jaruzelski et al 2011). However, culture is widely acknowledged to be hard to define and even harder to change.

Through a process of listening closely and dispassionately to an organisation's language, suggesting its connections with the way people think and perform, discourse analysis offer a practical, systematic and transparent way to make a culture visible to those working inside it. The implicit assumptions, beliefs and norms of an organisation, permeating its language at subtle but persistent level, constitute its *lived* culture. This is the culture experienced and enacted day to day by individuals within that organisation, but rarely if ever articulated. This is not necessarily the same as the *desired* culture, perhaps as contained in mission, vision or values statements. Once the lived culture is made visible it is open to conscious examination, and its current or continuing value can be assessed (Ereaut 2012, 2013).

There are a wide range of academic approaches falling into the broad category of discourse analysis, including Critical Discourse Analysis; Conversation Analysis; Foucauldian analysis; discursive psychology; cognitive linguistics; systemic functional linguistics and semiotic analysis. We use an inductive approach, allowing the data itself to suggest useful frameworks from across this range with which to make sense of the data and address the research questions under investigation.

The analysis is largely qualitative and adopts a 'hermeneutic' process – hermeneutics being a way of describing how, in qualitative research, meaning is derived and robust interpretations produced. In the 'hermeneutic circle' the researcher moves back and forth, '…studying parts in relation to the whole and the whole in relation to parts…combined with an analytic flow between abstract and concrete' (Kincheloe and McLaren 2000:286; see also Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988).

Focus on the VOA research

In the remainder of this paper we make reference to the methods that were applied to the VOA project in particular.

i. Objectives

The overall aims of this programme of research were:

- To use a collaborative and analytically sound approach to develop, along with people across the Agency, a description of a desired culture that will support the implementation of the VOA's long-term strategy

And to do this by:

- Helping the VOA understand its own culture, as revealed by the language everyone uses in the agency
- Sharing this insight with people at the VOA, so that they could use that insight to help the agency achieve its objectives and the changes it needs to make
- Making practical recommendations for how the VOA can both be more aware of, and change, its language to help it move to its aspired culture.

ii. Research Questions

The key research questions, covering both 2014 and 2015 stages of work, can be captured as follows:

- How does leadership and management language 'construct' key aspects of the organisation and the business – what assumptions are subtly encoded into the language being used?
- Especially – how are staff members positioned or constructed; and how are VOA's change processes positioned by implication in this 'official' and leadership language?

- Similarly, how does staff and local management language construct key aspects of the VOA? These include language used in relation to the VOA itself; its central task, concerns and purpose; the past and recent history of the VOA; the nature of and rationale for change; the change process to date; relations between staff and across grades/divisions; leadership/management; and staff communications.
- What assumptions and world views are subtly encoded into the language being used by different groups and/or in different contexts? How can we summarise these as a shared (or perhaps fragmented) 'culture'?
- How do people *express* what they see as a desired culture? How does this relate to what emerges from the discourse analysis?
- How can all the analysis be used to create (along with the VOA itself) a set of Language Principles to work across the agency, to help the VOA keep these issues in view, and to offer guidance to help it meet its long-term strategic goals?

iii Sourcing and handling data

Discourse analysis requires access to a wide range of linguistic data in order to identify recurring themes with appropriate confidence. The sample here covered spoken and written language, drawn from both informal and formal contexts.

Stage 1 (2014) data

Data collected at Stage 1 focussed on samples of 'leadership language' (how senior staff describe the VOA, the change process and staff), and 'official' language i.e. key communications and language heard or received by staff and which originated at senior levels[1]. This language was accessed via:

- 120+ documents - presentations, internal documents, staff comms, memos, webpages, emails, Hot Seat answers etc.
- 12 x interviews with senior VOA staff
- 4-5 hours of live meetings largely comprising senior staff
- Interactions and conversations between the VOA and ourselves regarding this project (including for example the ITT/brief).

To select documents, we applied two general principles, both appropriate for the collection of qualitative research data:
1. The first is to select for relevance/importance; selecting key documents, and texts likely to be of importance and salience. In this case, this was done by the VOA project team, in consultation with LL and VOA colleagues, working to a specification setting out a wide range of potential data sources.

2. A second approach, used where there is a large amount of potentially relevant material, is to devise an appropriate sampling strategy. Again, the VOA team selected items from the prior 12 months or so using an agreed sampling specification.

In both cases data was selected that focused on the VOA's *organisational change* and closely related topics. The research team within VOA then handled the collection and secure transfer of the data to our analytic team.

For the senior level interviews, it was important to ensure that people from the breadth of VOA's business areas could be included in the research. An email was drafted and sent from the CEO's office inviting those people to take part. Most of the 12 interviews were carried out face to face, but some by phone to allow a degree of regional coverage within tight deadlines. Each lasted around an hour.
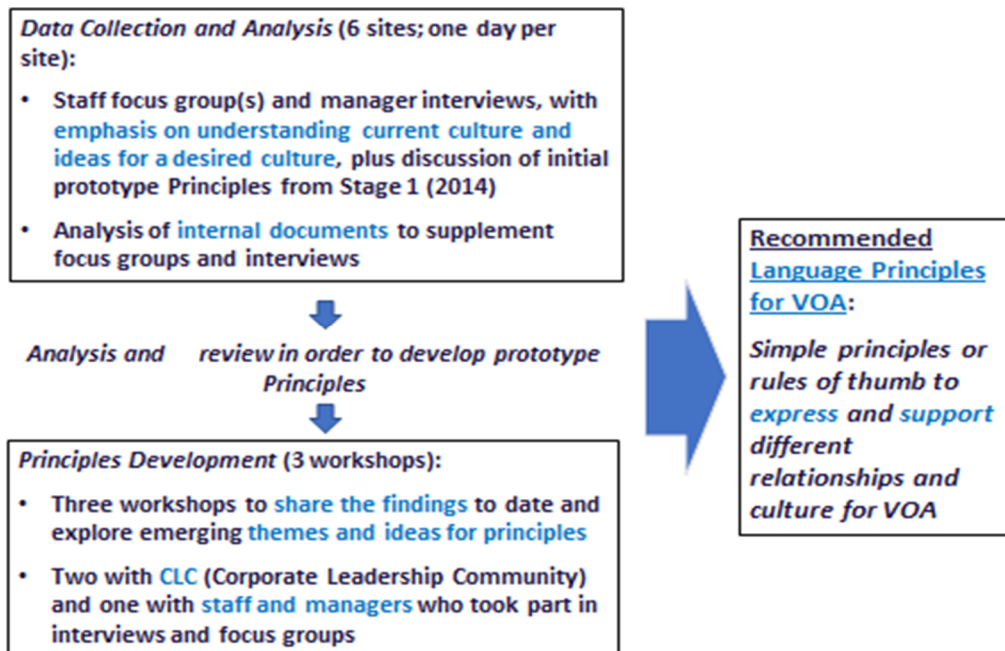
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[1] At stage 1 in 2014 a small sample of staff comments/interactions with leadership was also analysed, in the form of comments to central email inboxes and a sample of open comments from the 2013 staff survey. Staff language formed the focus of Stage 2 in 2015 however, and data from both stages were analysed and reported together then.

We also observed and recorded around 4-5 hours of internal meetings involving senior staff and some other staff, with the prior knowledge and permission of participants.

Stage 2 (2015) data

For this phase of the programme, data collected was skewed towards spoken language, accessed via interviews and informal staff workshops, plus some observation. A very small number of documents were in fact included and these were treated in the same way as those at Stage 1.

The process for this stage of work can be summarised as follows:

Data Collection and Analysis (6 sites; one day per site):
- Staff focus group(s) and manager interviews, with emphasis on understanding current culture and ideas for a desired culture, plus discussion of initial prototype Principles from Stage 1 (2014)
- Analysis of internal documents to supplement focus groups and interviews

Analysis and review in order to develop prototype Principles

Principles Development (3 workshops):
- Three workshops to share the findings to date and explore emerging themes and ideas for principles
- Two with CLC (Corporate Leadership Community) and one with staff and managers who took part in interviews and focus groups

Recommended Language Principles for VOA:

Simple principles or rules of thumb to express and support different relationships and culture for VOA

For the site interviews, it was again important to ensure that people from across the VOA's business areas could be included in the research. An email was drafted and sent from the Chief People Officer's office to six sites selected to represent the range, inviting people across grades to take part. In practice, a total of around 100 people were involved in the work either through focus groups/workshops or one to one in-depth conversations. We also observed and recorded one team meeting at a non-London site.

At both stages, all interviews and focus groups were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim for analysis. It was agreed with participants in advance that they would not be quoted nor their comments reported in an attributable way without their specific permission.

We used a very short topic guide for the interviews and focus groups, simply inviting participants to talk around a few key topics. This was to allow them – as far as possible – to use their own language, with minimal prompting or shaping of language by the interviewer. (Note though that towards the end of the staff focus groups at Stage 2 we also shared some of the early 'prototype' principles from the 2014 work, to explore these issues and themes more deeply.)

In the final fieldwork stage – 'Principles Development' – a number of key themes and prototype principles (by then called 'Groundrules') were shared with participants, in order that they could be co-developed. This co-development in fact resulted in the number of Groundrules being increased from three to five.

Data security and confidentiality

The nature of the data analysed was clearly very sensitive and appropriate measures were used to ensure its security. Transfer of data within our team was handled securely in encrypted form, and everyone coming into contact with data (including transcribers) was subject to a confidentiality agreement. The transcripts were not anonymised for use within the Linguistic Landscapes team but quotations, where these were used in reporting, were fully anonymised and checked to eliminate other possibly identifying features.

iv. Data analysis

We used an inductive approach, allowing the data itself to suggest useful frameworks with which to make sense of the information, based on the research questions under investigation. We analysed all material supplied for the first stage of analysis. We then focused on items for revisiting and more in-depth analysis, following and challenging hypotheses and emerging ideas. In this way the researchers revisited data multiple times while developing hypotheses, seeking to develop or - importantly - to refute those hypotheses.

Throughout, we were looking for patterns and anomalies that together formed a coherent account of the data. Using discourse analysis specifically, we were looking for weak signals - low-level but recurring patterns in language at all levels – lexical, structural, and grammatical. This means looking not just at words, but at features like the way sentences are routinely structured; the way people and things are positioned (say as active or passive); recurrent and extended metaphors – and more. The features and patterns that can be regarded as significant within discourse analysis are many, going well beyond the lexical.

In this case we largely adopted an approach drawn from discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell 1987, Potter 1996) which involves identifying:

- *Interpretative repertoires* i.e. a 'lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 138), or 'relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events in the world' (Edley, 2001: 198)[2]. Academic researchers have identified coherent 'repertoires' in many different fields; we ourselves have used this approach for example in analysing the dominant discourses in media coverage of climate change (Ereaut and Segnit 2006). Importantly, 'repertoires' offer ways to *make sense of and evaluate* new things and events – chains of logic which are simply seen as natural and inevitable. That is, they are sense-making strategies and not just ways to describe existing things or events.

- *Subject positions* available within those discourses, i.e. the locations within a text or the identities implied by a particular discourse and made relevant to us by particular ways of writing or talking (Edley, 2001). Examples in everyday life might include subject positions commonly available to those diagnosed with cancer – who have in the past overwhelmingly been invited to inhabit a 'victim' identity – and to win (or lose) their 'battle' via a 'heroic' identity. But more recently another option – that of 'cancer survivor' – has opened up in discourse – this leads to a quite different sense of who people in this situation may 'be'. Crucially, these options are not mere labels but have material effects – they may change how people are seen and treated by others, and how they may themselves feel they can act.

v. Ensuring robust qualitative analysis

This project was carried out using qualitative research processes and as such was subject to the caveats and limitations of this method. Especially, such work is interpretative and relies on the researcher's judgement of the meaning and significance of the evidence – there is no equivalent of a statistical theory that can be drawn upon to support findings 'objectively'. However, it was – as qualitative work should be – underpinned by careful and systematic analysis of the data. The nature of qualitative analysis means that the very thing that provides richness and insight – a researcher's close reading and interpretative approach to the material – also needs measures to be taken that allow sensitive cross-checking of those interpretations.

For this reason, we adopt the following processes:

1. *Data and document management*: the analysts and wider project team handling data practiced disciplined data management and analysis tracking, ensuring consistency of approach.

2. *Team working*: A small mixed team with different specialist skills allowed for cross-fertilisation of methods and perspective. Each team member carried out analysis separately – each with some unique data and some shared across analysts. Then the whole team came together face to face for an intensive sense-making session, from which the early analytic synthesis and hypotheses were

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[2]Note though that following Wiggins & Potter (2008) we tended to refer to these as 'discourses' throughout the analysis and at times in our reporting to the VOA.

drawn. A version of the synthesis was then used as the basis for another dive into the data, to seek clarification and indeed refutation of candidate interpretations. This emerging analysis was iteratively shared and refined across the team until it was relatively stable. Assembling a good set of illustrations and quotations - showing real examples of the linguistic features making up the significant patterns identified – was also an important task at this stage, since it allows users to see and feel the substance of what has been revealed.

3. *Validation with those close to the subject*: in this kind of work a powerful form of validation is offered by the resonance the analysis has with those who commissioned it and who will have to use it. It should offer a plausible but novel way to understand a familiar set of experiences, and ideally resonate with other things already known, but which were not part of the data. Essentially, it allows familiar situations and problems to be seen and thought about in new ways, opening up new possibilities for action.

Background Notes

The VOA is an executive Agency of HMRC. Its strategic function is to provide "the valuations and property advice required to support taxation and benefits" in England and Wales.

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