

# CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF A TEXTUAL KIND: DECONSTRUCTION AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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## Abstract

This theoretical paper attempts to achieve a cross-pollination between organizational psychology and the deconstructionist movement in poststructural philosophy. The first part of the paper deals with the paradigmatic, philosophical aspect. The second part tackles in short the link between organizational development (OD) and deconstructionism. Two points will be elaborated. (1) The integration of the learning perspective and the power perspective on organizational learning. (2) A social deconstructionist perspective on OD as complementary to the social constructionist approach will be presented.

This theoretical paper can be categorized under a number of attempts to look beyond the safe and warm womb of one's own discipline. New insights can grow out of an encounter with other disciplines. From our affiliation with the postmodern stance, we attempt to achieve a cross-pollination between organizational psychology and the sciences (here mainly philosophy) of language. This is not an easy job (Steyaert & Janssens, 1996). Billig (1996) calls the social thinkers who engage themselves in this enterprise *the students of detail*, since they closely examine the 'operations' of language to acquire insight into the social processes. The performativity of a number of theoretical concepts (such as text, author, narration, metaphor, rhetorics, dialogue, ...) are (to be) examined in their literal and metaphorical use. This interest of the psychologist in the sciences of language arises from the recent rise of social constructionism in our discipline.

In this paper the concept of '*text-as-metaphor*' constitutes the bridge between both disciplines. The enlargement of the linguistic, or textual, dimension contributes to new initiatives to catch the complexity of social reality, to create new insights and to explore their pragmatics (their *com*-prehensibility). Some insights offered by the *deconstructionist movement* in poststructural philosophy will be used here as a hat-rack to unite a number of tendencies in temporary organizational psychology. It's of course neither my intention to present a full overview of deconstructionism, nor to exhaust its implications for the social sciences. On the other hand, the paper has high hopes to draw the first lines in examining the generativity of some deconstructionist ideas so that a new perspective might emerge.

The first part of the paper deals with the paradigmatic, philosophical aspect. This will be developed in three stages. The second part tackles the link between organizational psychology and the deconstructionist vocabulary.

## POSTMODERNISM, CONSTRUCTIONISM AND DECONSTRUCTIONISM

### **The postmodern setting**

In the article of Burrell and Cooper (1988), where they explore the possibilities of the postmodern thought within the domain of organizational analysis, two differences between the modern and the postmodern stance are - in my reading - prominent: (1) the referential (denotation) versus the self-referential (connotation) characteristic of language and (2) the urge for unity (as a structuring force) versus the the Dionysian play of diversity (as a 'dynamizing' force). I shall elaborate both points below.

### The epistemological problem: denotation versus connotation

The modern discourse assumes that language denotes a non-linguistic essence of things. This enables people to judge of 'what is the case', so they can master and manipulate the world they are living in. This world appears as given, safe and trustworthy. Language is seen as just a vehicle to exchange pure and absolute (i.e. Platonic) ideas. The fact that these thoughts can only be uttered through sound and signs is "an unfortunate necessity" (Kilduff, 1993). Derrida names the idea that the meaning of the writer and the interpretation of the reader can coincide, the metaphysics of presence (Norris, 1991): a text is seen as a speech, wherein (the ideas of) the speaker is presented in his speaking. This metaphysics makes two points:

- (1) Because people are able to say "the same thing" by means of different words, we are tempted to conclude that meaning has a life of its own, that meaning precedes the utterance.
- (2) The expression of ideas places them in danger of contaminating their original meaning-as-intended. The ideas themselves are pure and are able to reach the Absolute, the Real.

The postmodern thinker tries to put those assumptions through which people think and speak, in the spotlight. For him (or maybe better: her) the vulnerability of human thought appears if we assume the following:

- (1) The sign can never be completely detached from the meaning. Ideas can never exist without a concrete (material) image.
- (2) Language is an autonomous whole of symbols referring to each other (i.e. connotation). It's a grammatical network of signs which forms the structure in which our thinking is born. Language shapes our reality (Bruner, in Olson, 1990; Maturana & Varela, 1989; Whorf, 1979). Numerous authors expressed this idea in different ways:

- Kelly (1955, pp.8-9): " Man looks at his world through transparent patterns or templets which he creates...";
- Goodman (1978): "We have to make what we find";
- Braudillard (1996, p.76): "It is the map that precedes the territory".
- Srivastva & Cooperrider (1990): "By the way we think, we create the organization we later discover."
- Pirsig (1974) compares *our* world with a heap of sand taken from an endless landscape. Our mind operates as a knife which divides the heap in pieces: high versus low, warm versus cold, etc.

All this implies that the gap between human thought and the absolute reality is unbridgeable: "the name is not the thing named" (Whitehead & Russel, 1910).

### The relational problem: unity versus variety

A second distinction between the modern and postmodern point of view is reflected in the dichotomy 'consensus-dissensus'. Modernity puts the primordality of unity in front. Mankind moves (slowly but steadily) through discussion and dialogue towards an ultimate consensus.

The postmodern discourse emphasizes on the other hand that consensus derives its significance from (the danger to relapse into) disagreement. Consensus is carried by dissensus. Thinking can only take place through a dialogue with (within a context of) alternative ways of thinking. Variety precedes unity and unity necessarily returns to variety. The concept of truth pretended to create consensus, falls short in a world fragmented by games of power.

The social constructionism movement underlines the relational dimension in the construction of insight. 'Being-in language', which allows people to understand their world, is seen as a part of 'being in interaction' (Gergen, 1985; Olthof & Vermette, 1994).

This paradigm stresses the importance of unanimous agreements when it comes to people living and working together. Consequently, the primordially of unity, which we find in modern discourse, is still 'in charge'. The frequent use of words such as 'community', 'shared meaning', 'co-construction', 'common sense' illustrates this tendency. However, dissensus is of course not denied. Distinction is to a certain extent always arbitrary and the constructivist notion of distinction leads to multiplicity: the universum of mankind is a *multiversum* (Maturana, 1988; in Olthof & Vermette, 1994). Every position within the social field involves a unique perspective (Bouwen & Fry, 1991), and generates its own *versum*.

This variety serves however as the background, the basis on which consensus can be built. The constructionist viewpoint underlines the importance of accomplishing a consensus, in wherein multiplicity is seen as a means, an impulse, rather than an end, a goal worth pursuing (cf. infra).

### To trace 'deconstruction'

The object of deconstruction is the *text*. The reader is invited to interpret this notion in a metaphorical way. The text stands for the symbolic world in which we are living. Figure 1 extends this metaphor.

*Scheme 1. Text-as-metaphor (part 1).*

ESSENCE	INTENTION
<b>WORLD</b>	<b>TEXT</b>
.....	.....
<b>COMPREHENSION</b>	<b>INTERPRETATION</b>

### Text and reader

Derrida's often quoted "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (1967) leaves out both the writer's intentions as well as the referent. Scheme 2 represents this and shows at the same time that reading a text implies writing another text (Eco, 1993, p.332). Every interpretation consists of words which (can be materialized into a text and) in its turn can be interpreted. This shows us the self-referential character of the textual world. In this metaphorical world, in which language and meaning are put in the forefront, the text is seen as the dynamic, ever-changing product of reading (interpretation) *as* rewriting (utterance). The latter 'as' indicates that individual (cognitive) and collective (relational) aspects of meaning are intertwined.

*Scheme 2. Text-as-metaphor (part 2).*

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INTENTION (of the writer)

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**TEXT**                    **as our world**  
                                  -----  
                                  **as interpretation**

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REFERENT (as an objective reality)

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On the other hand deconstruction refuses admittance to the idea that texts can be interpreted in a single, solid, correct univocal way. The meaning of an interesting text can never be fully exhausted (Oger, 1991, p.96). (This doesn't mean that any interpretation is permissible, à la Feyerabend's "anything goes".) An interpretation cannot eliminate the bulk of the other interpretations: they can at most be shadowed, put in the background.

So far the constructivist project and deconstructionism can be put on the same line. To shade this further, two kinds of reading can be distinguished (based on Eco, 1993). Both programs focus on the meaning within the text, rather than the intended meaning of the writer. The first reading is one of a constructivist kind, in which the reader (as text) predominates the text in search for *identity*. He looks for resemblance, or even imposes upon the text his own meaning system. He understands from what he has already understood. The reader draws a line between the true and the false, the right and the wrong, the only possibility and the universe of impossibilities (Otlhof & Vermette, 1994).

The deconstructivist reading doesn't deny this constructivist insight and emphasizes the distance (*difference*) between one's own frame and the text, and owing to this, it sheds light on the text's un-familiar, unruly character. This awareness allows a reading in which openness without submission can exist. The reader tries to find a generative balance between difference and identity, this is between the domination of the reader (who penetrates the text) and the domination of the text (which pervades the reader). The combination between involvement and detachment implies that the reader is not submitted to "what's already there", but acknowledges "what can be".

Text and power

Texts are not isolated entities. They are always embedded in a social context. Each text has its own audience which it attempts to convince. Hence, the power of texts is concealed in their persuasiveness. Every utterance leaves a trace of certainty behind. Each thought and speech is guided by language, which leads but misleads simultaneously. Our lingual reason uses tactics to reduce (forgets, denies) uncertainty.

Deconstruction "reminds us that rhetoric, metaphor, persuasion and propaganda are a living ... part of every text" (Steele, 1989, p.227). It recognizes that texts have the inevitable tendency to subject their readers to specific interpretations. Deconstructionist thinking wants to shed light on this strategic exclusion of certain ways of thinking. Kilduff (1993) writes: "Deconstruction is used, not to abolish truth, science, logic, and philosophy, but to question how these concepts are present in texts and how they are employed to systematically exclude certain categories of thought and communication." (p.15).

Questioning: power of the reader

Deconstructionist reading refuses to submit itself on the one hand to the stencil of the reader and on the other hand to the rigidity of the text. This reading asks questions to which the text doesn't encourage: about what it doesn't say and how it 'works'. "Deconstruction leads us from the figure to the ground" (Steele, 1989, p.227).

Texts are structured by a number of conceptual contrasts. One side of the dichotomy is assigned an original, inherent superior status. The other one plays only a derived, subordinate or arbitrary role (Desilet, 1991). Table 1 gives some examples.

*Table 1. Oppositions within the western culture*

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DOMINANT	versus	SUBORDINATE
normal		abnormal
product		process
standard		parasitical
positive		negative
fast		slow
good		bad
essential		adventitious
literal		non-literal
male		female
consensus		dissensus
simple		complex
identity		difference
unity		variety

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In every text a dichotomic hierarchy is present in which one idea is accentuated and the other is kept in secrecy. At the same time the text hides the mutual incorporation of those antipodes, in which they necessarily refer to each other. "Part of what a thing is *not* constitutes what it *is*" (Disilet, 1991). Hence, each hierarchy is arbitrary. The deconstructionist reading approaches the text as an open, fragile, unstable entity, which bears the possibility of other interpretations (i.e. the possibility of other, complementary, 'arrangements' of oppositions). Deconstruction fixes the eye upon what's behind the border: upon the 'blind spot', 'the moment of blindness, where a text fails to think through the problems engendered by its own modes of discourse" Norris, 1991, p.27).

The reader questions what the text takes for granted. He tries to realize this through the *encounter* between the text and himself, a dialogue, a balance between familiarity (identity) and strangeness (difference) in search for something new without losing communicative continuity.

New insights can emerge (1) by questioning the presented unity through bringing up the 'underlying' multitude, or (2) by transcending differences through emphasizing the unity that was placed in the shadow.

The process of deconstruction can be described in two phases. First one reverses the hierarchical opposition: One revalues what's been devalued, one states explicitly what remained implicit, one promotes (heightens) what's been lowered. However, "deconstruction is not simply a strategic reversal of categories which otherwise remain distinct and unaffected. It seeks to undo both a given order of priorities *and* the very system of conceptual opposition that makes that order possible" (Norris, 1991, p.31). Secondly one tries to shift the system of meaning in order to mount it by introducing a new concept or metaphor. In short, deconstruction "put(s) into practice a *reversal* of classical opposition and a general *displacement* of the system" (Derrida, 1982).

Notice the similarity between Derrida's concept of deconstruction and the principle of analytic symmetry formulated by Cooper & Law (1995; in Chai, 1995).

## **ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Deconstructionism has been introduced by a number of psychologists (e.g. Steele, 1989) and organizational theorists (e.g. Kilduff, 1993). Those authors applied deconstruction to academic texts.

This paper tries to make a first step towards the examination of the application of the deconstructionist vocabulary to social phenomena. In short I would like to address two points related to organizational development (OD): (1) the integration of the learning perspective and of the power perspective on organizational life, and (2) the introduction of a deconstructionist OD approach.

Although this notion of text insinuates stability, here it is seen as a dynamic product, an ever-changing, volatile entity which is constantly rewritten. As a product, however, it can be grasped and subjected to inquiry. It invites organizational members to slow down the organizational life they are living, to enlarge the moment of self-reflectivity.

### **The integration of the learning perspective and power perspective**

Traditionally, the power perspective and learning perspective are seen as standing for mutually exclusive social phenomena. Morgan writes (1986): "Learning ... calls for a reframing of attitudes emphasizing the importance of ... flexibility over rigidity, collaboration over competition, openness over closedness, and democratic inquiry over authoritarian belief" (p.109).

From a deconstructionist viewpoint however, language (as the ultimate means by which people communicate and learn) contains a dimension of sensemaking and a dimension of power.

This integrative perspective gives way to a direction of research in which the contribution of rhetorical power within collective learning processes can be examined. These insights can help us understand how learning can be improved by managing the element of persuasiveness inherent in communication: how can we deal with the implicit "declaration of certainty" (Kilduff, 1993, p.14), the inevitable presence of the argument and exploit its contribution towards change?

### **Organization development from a deconstructionist point of view**

Briefly I will examine the social constructionist approach as elaborated by Bouwen (1994). Afterwards, the deconstructionist approach will be contrasted with the former and will be suggested as a possibly complementary viewpoint. By contrasting both approaches, the aim is

to accentuate the differences between both points of view, rather than to polarise them unnecessarily (and as a consequence reduce them).

Schein (1987, Burke, 1994) describes the organizational development process, in accordance with the Lewinian action research approach, in three phases: (1) unfreezing, (2) changing and (3) refreezing. These phases represent the transition from an organization logic to a change logic. To organize requires a reduction from multiplicity and ambiguity (consensus orientation), whereas change requires variation to loosen up rigid ways of thinking (dissensus orientation; Bouwen, 1994).

The social constructionist intervention skill as elaborated by Bouwen (1994) can be reproduced concisely by means of the following steps:

1. An ambiguous problem creates a variety of interpretations between different communities within an organization. Or, the other way around, the ambiguous interpretations of a situation create cooperation problems.
2. The different communities are brought together, in the course of which configurations of meanings and relations are made explicit and mapped. As a consequence, cognitive fixations become dereified and relationships between groups are redefined.
3. This process leads to the formulation of a "common script". Already present fragmented wholes of readings are brought together and are used to dereificate points of view, which results in a shared reinterpretation.

What can be called the *social deconstructionist approach*, can complete the above described process. The starting point now is a univocal interpretation of a situation *within* a community, in which an attitude of certainty dominates. The deconstruction process consists of questioning interpretations, which creates room for new perspectives to emerge. The differences between both approaches are schematically accentuated in the table below. Where the solving of problems is at the center within the social constructionist approach, the center of the social deconstructionist approach is rather the problematizing of solutions. Bouwen (1994) states that the construction of a common frame must leave the possibility for diversity in order to be able to respond to change. The deconstruction process can be applied to guarantee this variety.

Table 2. Constructionism versus deconstructionism within OD

	SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM	SOCIAL DECONSTRUCTIONISM
point of departure	ambiguity	certainty
method	* dereification by multiperspectivism * between communities	* dereification "through" self-questioning * within a community
point of dénouement	unity	variety

Deconstructionist thinking expresses three insights: (1) every sensemaking (like learning, gaining insight, ...) is connected with a rhetorical dimension; (2) as a result people build common certainties; (3) therefore they deny dissensus as a continuous generative principle within a community. The generativity of variety depends on the process of dereification. Deconstructionism enlarges this moment of dereification, in which people translate 'the way of being' in 'a way of seeing' (Feltmann, 1991).

## IN CONCLUSION

The bulk of this paper consists of the introduction of the deconstructionist thought. In short two questions are put in the forefront. (1) How can we gain insight in the contribution of rhetorical power to the collective learning processes within organizations? And (2) how can we obtain a further understanding in the dereification process as a transition between two qualitatively different ways of thinking? Deconstructionism can support this project. Hence, it contributes to a further growth of the organizational development expertise, wherein the process consultant loosens up the fixations in the thinking of the client. This dereification process takes place through the problematizing of solutions rather than through the solutioning of problems, through slowing down processes between people to achieve attentive readings.

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