



'We're the nurses': Metaphor in the discourse of workplace socialisation



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ABSTRACT

New employees face a challenging task when integrating into a new work context as they are exposed to unfamiliar interactional norms and workplace practices. This study explores the role of metaphor during the acquisition of such norms and practices through an analysis of interaction between a skilled Chinese migrant intern and his assigned mentor in the accounting team of a New Zealand government department. The study identifies metaphorical language used during the workplace socialisation period as forming multiple emergent metaphor structures which play a key role in forming a cohesive picture of 'the way we do things round here'.

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1. Introduction

Being a newcomer to a workplace can be a difficult experience. In order to learn how to interact in the new context, newcomers undergo a complex process of socialisation through which an understanding of the norms and procedures of the workplace is gradually acquired (Chao et al., 1994). The existing employees have a critical role to play (Reichers, 1987; Scott and Myers, 2010), participating in the discursive construction of organisational systems and procedures through their everyday talk. Metaphor, it is hypothesised, is fundamentally involved in this process.

Metaphor has been widely studied, modern research flourishing after the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. In showing that metaphor is ubiquitous in both thought and language, Lakoff and Johnson opened the floodgates to three decades of research, a large portion underpinned by their conceptual metaphor theory. In the past decade, metaphor has been identified and analysed in discourse over a wide variety of topics and media (see Gibbs, 2008 for an overview). Driving such research is the belief that identifying metaphors affords us insight into the conceptualisations operating behind texts, allowing one to peer into the cognitive landscape of the society or individual from which it was produced. This motivation is, however, a contentious one, as others point out that conceptual metaphor theory lacks explanatory power in terms of accurately mapping conceptual structures and in accounting for figurative language use and comprehension (McGlone, 2007).

Linguistic metaphors occur in many communicative contexts, from political rhetoric to creative works. Their appeal lies in the ability to convey complex abstract notions in a quick and easily comprehensible way through activating latent symbols in the audience (Mio, 1997). Research has shown the presence of metaphor in numerous discourse contexts (see, for example, Cameron, 2003; Low et al., 2007; Semino and Masci, 1996; Tay, 2011; Woodhams, 2012), making it a likely presence in the representation of workplace norms. However, research into the role of metaphor in employee socialisation is scarce, particularly that which adopts a discourse analytic perspective focusing on naturalistic spoken data. Recent research has proposed that metaphor is both dynamic and interactive, arguing for a move away from static conceptual metaphor

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categories towards so-called systematic metaphors (Cameron, 2003, 2007). Systematic metaphors emerge bottom-up from the data, defined as ‘the dynamic collection of connected linguistic metaphors, a trajectory from one metaphor to the next over the dynamics of talk’ (Cameron et al., 2009, p. 78). Coupling spoken data with a view of metaphor as an interactionally emergent and dynamic phenomenon represents an exciting avenue to explore for the field of workplace discourse, shifting the focus away from explanations of the nature of conceptual structures to understanding the discourse context in which metaphors arise (see also Tay, 2011).

This study investigates the role of metaphor in representing workplace norms during the socialisation of a new employee. A close analysis of interactions between a skilled migrant and his mentor during a work placement in a New Zealand government department is carried out. It is hypothesised that metaphor is employed to represent workplace norms in a simple and understandable manner, providing the intern opportunity to learn how to become an effective member of the team.

2. Literature review

The complex nature of the socialisation process of outsiders into new groups has been the object of investigation from various angles, with studies carried out across social psychology, organisation studies, communication studies and education. Language is often acknowledged across these fields as being an important factor in workplace socialisation (Barge and Schlueter, 2004; Chao et al., 1994; Duff, 2008; Hobbs, 2004), but research often varies in the degree to which discourse analysis is utilised. The aims of this paper are to investigate how metaphor contributes to the discursive construction of workplace norms during the socialisation of a new employee and to demonstrate the utility of metaphor analysis as a productive means into understanding an important yet neglected aspect of workplace discourse research.

The fields of organisation studies and management both have a tradition of utilising macro discourse approaches often associated with social constructionism and as such provide a useful starting point from which to locate this study in the literature. Research in this tradition is generally grouped under the term organisational socialisation (Fisher, 1986; Saks and Ashforth, 1997; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) and is particularly useful when viewing discourse as a broader social phenomenon that contributes to the construction of organisational identity (Vaughn, 1997). Other studies within these fields have addressed socialisation from an interactive perspective, favouring dynamic process approaches rather than traditional ‘stage’ models (Reichers, 1987; Scott and Myers, 2010). Process approaches warn against defaulting to reductionist understandings of complex phenomena and acknowledge the centrality of communicative processes in workplace socialisation, an approach central to several studies (Barge and Schlueter, 2004; Duff, 2008; Hobbs, 2004). However, despite an emphasis on communication, organisational socialisation research often foregrounds the perspective of management or individual differences and does little to illustrate the everyday discursive reality faced by newcomers themselves. The current study takes from this research strand a dynamic and communicative view of the socialisation process and expands the focus further to include analysis of the everyday discourse of the workplace environment.

In addition to acquiring fundamental linguistic skills necessary to communicate in new workplace settings, newcomers must also develop sociopragmatic skills such as learning how to engage appropriately in small talk and humour (Holmes, 2005). Studies by Holmes and Riddiford (2009, 2011) placed the development of sociopragmatic skills at the forefront in investigating their effect on workplace integration and highlighted the practical implications for educating migrants who wish to join the New Zealand workforce. The acquisition of sociopragmatic skills is a particularly important area of focus for research with participants who are not native speakers of the workplace language, as is the case with the intern in focus for this study. Researching the interactions of participants who have lower levels of workplace language proficiency raises questions as to their comprehension of both the linguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of the new workplace.¹ Nevertheless, for both native and non-native speakers of the workplace language, integration can be viewed as a learning process and workplaces as sites of learning much like classrooms in which linguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge play significant roles (Billett, 2004; Eames and Bell, 2005; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Metaphor may be a linguistic means of portraying the sociopragmatic norms of the workplace to the newcomer in an attempt to enhance or accelerate their acquisition of organisational skills.

Turning the focus to workplace communication and discourse, sociolinguistics offers a handful of studies that demonstrate the utility of focusing in detail on interaction that takes place during employee integration. In this vein, socialisation is treated as a negotiated communicative process centred in interaction much like the process approaches advocated in organisation studies. Sociolinguistic research differs in its explicit analytical focus on the role of language in context. A number of studies demonstrate the utility of such a focus through exploring features such as humour, jargon, expletives and storytelling. Mak (2008) and Schnurr and Mak (2009) demonstrated how both humour and storytelling are implicated in organisational socialisation. Adopting a community of practice (CofP) viewpoint, the authors collected recordings and interviews from three Hong Kong workplaces. The authors found that in addition to teaching newcomers how to go about their work, humour was also used to exclude them from workplace CofPs. The studies formed part of Mak’s (2009) MPhil thesis, which looked in detail at various features of workplace socialisation such as jargon, code-switching, humour, social talk and expletives, clearly demonstrating the primacy of language in the experiences of new employees as they acquire workplace norms. Other studies have further highlighted the role of language in socialisation: Pullin (2011) focused on humour, arguing that it

¹ This raises the issue of cross-cultural comprehension of metaphor (see, for example, Boers and Demecheleer, 2001; Boers et al., 2004; Charteris-Black, 2002; Kövecses, 2005). While undoubtedly an important factor, claims about metaphor comprehension remain outside the scope of this study.

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