Written and Oral Communication in the Workplace— Deployment, Stabilized Forms of Interactions, and Workload: An Organizational Approach

Pierre Delcambre[1]

The present study is representative of the French approach to information and communication science (Taylor & Delcambre, 2010). It is in this academic field that most of the research on organizational communication has indeed been carried out for the past twenty years (Bouillon, Bourdin, & Loneux, 2007; Delcambre, 2000; Le Moënne, 1998, 2000; Bouzon & Meyer, 2006). This context may suggest that certain viewpoints are adopted not from an analysis of organizations per se but rather from an analysis of the information and communication phenomena taking place in organizations and, more recently, between organizations. This same French context (in which students are trained in the information and communication professions) encouraged researchers not to limit themselves to the study of communication as produced in specialized units of organizations. Furthermore, the information and

[1]Université Charles-de-Gaulle–Université Lille III, Lille, France

Corresponding Author:
Pierre Delcambre, Geriico (Groupement des Equipes de recherche interdisciplinaires en Information et Communication), UFR Arts et Culture, Université Charles-de-Gaulle– Université Lille III, Domaine Universitaire Pont de Bois, BP 149 59653 Villeneuve d'Ascq Cedex, France
Email: pierre.delcambre@univ-lille3.fr

communication technologies (ICT) that were developed during that time as well as the new theoretical constructions (sociology of convention, anthropology of techniques, actor-network theory) were leading them to another position: that of not focusing primarily on the study of the human–machine dichotomy in information and communication work.

In this presentation of my work, I will not attempt to situate my approach in relation to other French approaches to organizational communication (see Delcambre, 2008) but rather within the momentum of its own development. The position I defend in my academic field is that to develop research and study on organizational communication, we also need to address the origins of the concept of action issued from current sociological theories (Ladrière, Pharo, & Quéré, 1993; Ricoeur, 1986) as well as discourse analyses (Faïta, 1997; Gramaccia, 2001; Grosjean & Lacoste, 1999) dealing in particular with text production in the workplace (Dardy, 1996; Delcambre, 1997). Combining a socioanthropological perspective to analyze the framework of communication with a perspective of expression seems to me a useful route to take.

My work is anchored in research carried out during the decade from 1985 to 1995 and focuses on the French Network "Language and Work" (Borzeix & Fraenkel, 2001). While a number of studies were concerned with the transformation of industrial or noncommercial organizations, the researchers in this network wanted to break away from traditional methodologies and epistemologies. In the "sociology of work" tradition (Desmarez & Freyssenet, 1994), they used organizations as their basis for research and, in observing the interactions that were taking place in organizational settings, posited that work could not be considered simply as the execution of tasks. By implementing the methods used to observe exchanges in the workplace, they strove to develop a means of analyzing the language aspect of group endeavor (Grosjean & Lacoste, 1999; Joseph, 1993). Within this context, a certain number of researchers (Dumont & Revuz, 1994; Fraenkel, 1992; Pène & Delcambre, 1995) started to delve into the subject of *written communication in the workplace* (Chantraine & Delcambre, 1992; Delcambre, 1997; Basse, 2003).

This analytical shift from language activity (Boutet, 1995) to written communication and practices in the work context led to further theoretical work developed by other research movements. Three of these shifts can be identified: First of all, the world of writing and texts led to more long-term research, which led to the identification of an immense variety of working papers, the stabilization of forms (Gardey, 2008), as well as the existence of professional approaches reflecting the writers' relationship with the written

word, a relationship that may happen to be entirely different from their first familiarization with writing at school (Delcambre & Reuter, 2002).

Second, the very concept of writing had to be deconstructed to allow us to distinguish between different functional universes, such as the practices of *marking*, *text writing*, and *formalization* (Charrasse, 1995). And in the final deconstructive challenge, we had to describe writing not only as a final moment of putting words in text but also as a long series of successive operations. It quickly became apparent that writing and discussing inherited textual forms and reactive interactions, succeeded one another, and mingled in the work context (Delcambre, 1997; Pène, 2001). It therefore behooved us to describe this complex organization of transactions and these writing devices.

In fact our theoretical challenge here is to describe how interactions, transactions and more broadly exchanges are organized, inside or between organizations, analyzing inherited or customized forms, and locally innovative practices as well as these which are imported through outside suggestions. In grappling with this transactional framework, we are not ignoring the worker's involvement in these transactions and interactions, but we are shifting the focus. From a methodological viewpoint, this work involves a combination of several levels of analysis partnering the socioanthropological aspect with the semio-pragmatic aspect, an approach that has been explored very little so far, or at least not systematically. We will outline four of these levels here.

A well-known level is that of interaction analysis focusing on the local organization's frameworks that distribute the workloads. The approach we propose is that of identifying the multiple linguistic and cognitive transactions comprising the work activity. Each transaction is realized in a timeframe consisting of exchanges that are more or less formalized, organized, piloted, or assisted by the tools of intellectual effort. Not only is the organization of work distributed and the people in charge of each transaction described, but the transaction partners are also identified (subcontractors, consultants, regulatory or controlling decision makers, customers or users of a service, etc.). Frameworks exist for the interactions that take place because all interactions at work are linked with transactions that implement the activity. The analysis can thus be refined into transactions or acts that reach beyond the here and now of their execution by the employees engaged in the transaction. This level, if it is able to reflect the constant features of recurring organization, is where practices are invented and formalized. To proceed from a planned or recommended action to performance, consultants, local innovators, trained or qualified, and the experienced old hands set up steering committees and

establish new formalisms (including those of a documentary nature) enabling the stabilization of the forms of exchange.

Another level, clearly identified in the description of organized action, is that of the organization that imposes its authority, manages, and governs. A performance-based sociology breaks with this level of description (Latour, 2007). However, I would be inclined to keep it since it is, after all, the social-economic level that sets up, prescribes, allocates, and regulates. The analytical difficulty—if we want to develop a long-term analysis favoring the analysis of activity and work—is that a device displaces and attempts to transform across-the-board how work is organized and accomplished. For instance, an older device formerly distributed places in a geographical area and for a given number of organizations. These organizations had, in turn, interpreted the device organizationally and functionally, which had led them to organize the work and its local distribution in a specific way. Since then, a new device took place while skills, know-how, responsibilities, and contribution have been successfully developed in connection with the former device. Its objective is to effect a shift, but sustainable modifications must be analyzed over time, throughout the progression of this organizational reinterpretation and capacity for redistribution, while acknowledging the quality of the workers' contributions (De Crescenzo, 2005). Aligning this approach with a semio-pragmatic viewpoint consists of identifying the material expression of these communication devices. At certain periods, a set of phenomena is stabilized and eventually experienced as quite natural. These phenomena include architectural constructions, statutory instruments, social rituals, body language, and particular settings where knowledge and power relationships are constructed. For example, who questions what some communication devices, like the "amphi" (university lecture hall), the review (of troops), the check-up (by a doctor), the employment contract (for managers), permit or structure and impose? In a weaker version of the concept, we could say that the employee at work is placed in an organizational, architectural, machine-assisted, and prescribed arrangement that closely structures not only the work of the group but also the forms of exchange.

The third level comprises a description of stable forms, more often than not giving rise to an analysis of symbolic forms. Written forms can be locally stabilized, although more rarely with significant chronological and geographical breadth of scope (in-house newsletters, department memos, notice boards, balance sheets, quality reports, etc.). Other forms of exchange are just as stable (a manager's contract, a leaving party, a departmental meeting, etc.). The study of these stabilized forms helps to highlight an institutionalized power in exchanges, something like a desire to *make it last* in a context that

does not have the durability of an institution and an involvement on the part of the various staff members who *commit themselves* to these exchanges. We shall therefore analyze the introduction of these forms, the borrowing of forms that are ready-for-use, so to speak. From the viewpoint of an analysis of work, the genesis of forms and their generalization opens up the way for an analysis of the consultant's role, the training, and also all the ways of setting in place so-called good practices.

At the fourth and last level, we hypothesize that if work is not just a group endeavor, if it leads to a reflection on the very nature of work, we would have to envisage a new level of analysis aimed at a different understanding of the transactions and work activity, focusing our attention on the contributions of the person in charge. The work thus conceived is both material and intellectual. The transactions consist of tasks that are both information-based (with data and text produced according to certain protocols and information systems) and communication-based (production is *addressed*; certain results are locally discussed to be *validated* before being sent). As the employees in question are highly involved in the success of what they are doing, their work is thus inscribed in the present, *just being done*. Just like collective activity, the individual work is the embodiment of practical accomplishments (Borzeix, 2006, pp. 26-27). As we are also interested in the linguistic dimension of this work, we can discover what triggers the expressive dimension of language in the workplace for those who are not, as employees, within auctorial dimensions. This is what has led me to a new exploration of the theories of discourse in the workplace context (Delcambre, 2007).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Basse, P. (2003). *Projet d'établissement, cadre de santé et communications de travail à l'hôpital*. Lille, France: Université de Lille 3.

Bidet, A., Borzeix, A., Pillon, T., Rot, G., & Vatin, F. (2006). *Sociologie du travail et activité* [Sociology of work and activity]. Toulouse, France: Octares Editions.

Borzeix, A., L'écologie des activités a-t-elle besoin d'une théorie du sujet ? Ou de l'importance du gérondif. In Bidet, A., Borzeix, A., Pillon, T., Rot, G., & Vatin, F. *Sociologie du travail et activité* [Sociology of work and activity] (pp.25-27). Toulouse, France: Octares Editions.

Borzeix, A., & Fraenkel, B. (Eds.). (2001). *Langage et Travail: Communication, cognition, action*. Paris: CNRS Editions.

Bouillon, J-L., Bourdin, S., & Loneux, C. (Eds.). (2007). Migrations conceptuelles: D'où viennent les concepts de la communication organisationnelle where do the organizational communication concepts come from?). *Communication & Organisation*, *31*.

Boutet, J. (Ed.). (1995). *Paroles au travail* [Words at work]. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Bouzon, A., & Meyer, V. (Eds.). (2006). *La communication organisationnelle en questions, Méthodes et méthodologies* [Organizational communication issues, methods and methodologies]. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Chantraine, O., & Delcambre, P. (Dir). (1992). Pratiques d'écriture et champs professionnels (2) [Writing practices and professional fields (2)]. *Études de communication*, *13*.

Charrasse, D. (1995). Marquage et entreprise scripturaire: la construction d'un monde sans auteur "Marking while the industrial process goes on: an authorless communication?". *Études de Communication, 16,* 135-164.

Dardy, C. (1996). Lieux d'inscription: des équipements pas comme les autres [Registration sites: Equipment like no other]. *Études de Communication,16,* 37-58.

De Crescenzo, J. C. (2005). *Les réseaux clandestins de salariés. Etude d'une forme de réponse organisationnelle face aux régimes managériaux de mobilisation de la force de travail* [The underground networks of employees. Study of a form of organizational response to address the managerial regimes to mobilize the workforce]. Lille, France: Université de Lille 3.

Delcambre, I., & Reuter, Y. (Dir). (2002). Images du scripteur et rapports à l'écriture [Images of the writer and ways of writing reports]. *Pratiques, 113-114*.

Delcambre, P. (1997). *Écriture et communications de travail: Pratiques d'écriture des éducateurs spécialisés* [Writing and communications at work: Social Workers's Writing Practices]. Lille, France: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion.

Delcambre, P. (Ed.). (2000). *Communications organisationnelles. Objets, pratiques, dispositifs* [Organizational Communication: Objects, practices, devices]. Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Delcambre, P. (2007). Pour une théorie de la communication en contexte de travail, appuyée sur des théories de l'action et de l'expression "Toward a workfield communication theory based both upon action and expression theories". *Communication & Organisation, 31,* 43-63.

Delcambre, P. (2008). Un état des recherches en communications organisationnelles en France (2000-2007): l'âge de la transmission? [A state of research in organizational communications in France (2000-2007): The age of the transmission?] *Sciences de la société, 74*, 11-25.

Desmarez, P., & Freyssenet, M. (Eds.). (1994). Les énigmes du travail. Work as an enigma. *Sociologie du travail, 36*.

Dumont, M., & Revuz, C. (Eds.). (1994). Ecriture, travail, formation [Writing, Work, Training]. *Éducation Permanente, 120.*

Faïta, D. (Ed.). (1997). Communiquer . . . les mots de l'expérience. "Communicate work life: what words for talking?". *Études de communication, 20.*

Fraenkel, B. (1992). *La signature. Genèse d'un signe* [Signature: Genesis of a sign]. Paris: NRF Gallimard.

Gardey, D. (2008). *Écrire, calculer, classer. Comment une révolution de papier a transformé les sociétés contemporaines (1800-1940)* [Write, calculate, classify: How a paper revolution has transformed contemporary societies (1800-1940)]. Paris: La Découverte.

Gramaccia, G. (2001). *Les actes de langage dans les organisations* [The speech acts in organizations]. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Grosjean, M., & Lacoste, M. (1999). *Communication et intelligence collective: Le travail à l'hôpital* [Communication and collective intelligence: Working at the hospital]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Joseph, I. (Ed.). (1993). *Régulation du trafic et information des voyageurs au PCC de la ligne A du RER, Réseau 2000* [Traffic control and passenger information produced in CCP line of the RER, Network 2000]. Paris: RATP éditeur.

Ladrière, P., Pharo, P., & Quéré, L. (Eds.). (1993). *La théorie de l'action. Le sujet pratique en débat* [The theory of action: The practical subject in debate]. Paris: CNRS Editions.

Latour, B. (2007). *Changer de société, refaire de la sociologie* [Changing society, the reconstruction of sociology]. Paris: La Découverte.

Le Moënne, C. (Ed.). (1998). *Communications d'entreprises et d'organisations* [Communications of businesses and organizations]. Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Le Moënne, C. (Ed.). (2000, May/October). La communication organisationnelle en débat [Questions about organizational communication]. *Sciences de la Société, 50-51.*

Pène, S., (2001). Les agencements langagiers de la qualité [Language arrangements for Quality]. In A. Borzeix & B. Fraenkel (Eds.), *Langage et Travail: Communication, cognition, action* (pp. 303-321). Paris: CNRS.

Pène, S. (2005). *Société de disponibilité. La vie quotidienne des communautés arti-ficielles* [Society availability: The daily life of artificial communities]. Paris: Celsa-Paris IV.

Pène, S., & Delcambre, P. (Dir). (1995). Pratiques d'écriture et champs profession-nels (3) [Writing practices and professional fields (3)]. *Études de communica-tion, 16*.

Ricoeur, P. (1986). *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'Herméneutique, II* [From text to action: Hermeneutics Essays, II]. Paris: Seuil/Esprit.

Taylor, J. R., & Delcambre, P. (in press). La communication organisationnelle: histoire, enjeux et fondements [Organizational communication: History, issues, and foundations]. In S. Grosjean & L. Bonneville (Eds.), *Communication organi-sationnelle: approches, processus et enjeux*. Montreal, Quebec, Canada: Gaëtan Morin.

Bio

Pierre Delcambre is a professor of information and communication sciences at the University of Lille Charles de Gaulle, Lille, France. His research, from an anthropo-logical point of view, focuses on workplace relationships and effects of writing process on organizations.