

# Ubuntu as a key African management concept: contextual background and practical insights for knowledge application

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – To explore how an increasing attention which is being paid to language and culture in organisations can help people to understand the impact of particular management concepts in business practices.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A range of publications has been selected to indicate how important language in organisations is and how particular cultural backgrounds influence the applicability of management concepts. This has been illustrated with the concept Ubuntu, which gains popularity in South Africa.

**Findings** – The applicability of Ubuntu in companies will rely on the habitus of the manager to be a good conversationalist.

**Originality/value** – So far the Western literature about management knowledge has neglected the development of particular management concepts originating in other parts of the world.

**Keywords** National cultures, Knowledge transfer, Linguistics, Africa

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

The last decade *Ubuntu* has been introduced as a new management concept in the South African popular management literature (Lascaris and Lipkin, 1993; Mbigi and Maree, 1995). “Even South Africa has made a contribution with the rise of something called “*Ubuntu* management” which tries to blend ideas with African traditions as tribal loyalty” (Micklethwait and Woodridge 1996, p. 57). Mangaliso (2001, p. 23) points out that with the dismantling of apartheid in the 1990s South Africa embarked on a course toward the establishment of a democratic non-racial, non-sexist system of government. “With democratic processes now firmly in place, the spotlight has shifted to economic revitalization”. To support this revitalization, *Ubuntu* became introduced as a new management concept to improve the coordination of personnel in organizations. *Ubuntu* is seen as humaneness, “a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness, that individuals and groups display for one another”. By using the Hampden-Turner and Trompenaarsmodel (1993) concerning the seven cultures of capitalism he reviews the competitive advantages of *Ubuntu*. One of the themes within that model focuses on language and communication. Mangaliso (2001, p. 26) stresses the fact that “traditional management training places greater emphasis on the efficiency of information transfer. Ideas must be translated quickly and accurately into words, the medium of the exchange must be appropriate, and the receiver must accurately understand the message. In the *Ubuntu* context, however, the social effect on conversation is emphasized, with primacy given to establishing and reinforcing relationships. Unity and understanding among effected group members is valued above efficiency and accuracy of language”. To that end – Mangaliso notices – it is encouraging to see that many white South Africans start to learn indigenous languages to better understand patterns of interactions and deal with personnel appropriately.

With this mastering of language(s) Mangaliso has pointed at an intriguing issue, which needs further exploration. He creates a contrast between traditional management approaches (like Taylorism and Fordism) and *Ubuntu*. Whereas the former only focuses on formal language as a means to transfer information in an efficient way, the latter is based on conversation. This contrast reflects an interesting debate, which actually takes place in the management literature. There is the modernist perspective that conceives management knowledge as a predefined, reified object adopted by organizations. Although Thairu (1999, p. 151) admits that “communication in Africa needs to build on people’s experiences and capacities and needs to take into account sensitivity arising from cultural and religious perceptions and practices” he still uses a traditional sender-receiver model to show how knowledge management is conveyed as a set of objective messages. Such a model of diffusion of management knowledge like in the form of management concepts presupposes that adoption of new concepts is given by the intrinsic merits of these predefined objects and/or the characteristics of potential adopters while the organizational stakeholders comply with

norms of rationality and of progress. In contrast to this model (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000), there is an increasingly popular perspective conceiving management knowledge as constructed via processes of transmission like conversation (Shotter, 1993; Lervik and Lunnan, 2004). In this respect it can be noticed that over the last decade or so there has been a significant increase in the study of language in organization studies (Grant *et al.*, 1998; Holman and Thorpe, 2003, Moldoveanu, 2002). Some of the research being conducted in this area is meant to be potentially useful to managers. In that context the initiative of those white South African managers can be positioned to learn other languages as a way to become better experts while designing an approach which strengthens their capability to calculate rational solutions to problems by improved manipulation. This kind of approach is, however, still managerialist in the sense that it embraces the traditional view that managers get things done through the actions of others. A lot of management concepts that have been developed over the last 25 years indeed reinforce managerial interests instead of being focused on broader managerial practices. If, however, the mastering of languages is meant to make managers become good conversationalists who are both responsive listeners and responsive speakers in order to manage interactions instead of actions (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003), we deal with a different view on language. The purpose of speaking many languages may then be seen as a way to achieve commonly shared objectives (Falola, 2003). This capability to speak different “languages” consists of showing how what is proposed by managers can fit everybody’s interests. This is what is at stake with *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* does not only enhance communication between management and employees but provides voice too, i.e. a participatory interaction where openly conflictual social formation can occur, producing voice and inventive ways of living together (Deetz, 2003).

This other view on the functioning of language clarifies how an effective implementation of *Ubuntu* in organizations can take place. Managers who are good conversationalists are able to tell a story, which does not only refer to the facts but can also be liveable for all those involved.

In the remainder of our contribution we would like to present our argument in three steps.

We first explore the increasing attention being paid to the role of language in organizations and how this issue is linked to organizational cultures. This focus on language provides a better way to understand how management knowledge is being applied. In the second section the development of *Ubuntu* as a management concept will be explored. Its role as a setting to promote conversations, which lead to common understanding and consensus, will be stressed. Finally, attention will be paid to the ways *Ubuntu* can be conducive to the establishment of an African managerial habitus.

## Language and organizational cultures

Cultures manifest themselves in the behaviours, which follow from them. The major vehicle for the transmission and manifestation of the values and principles which lie at the core of a culture is language. Watson (1994, p. 112) therefore contends that “we know a culture primarily through language”. People in organizations need a degree of common language to reach effective cooperation. Within such a common language specific values and priorities will be shared. This will of course not deny the fact that there might exist within an organization a tension between the official culture of an organization and the unofficial one.” “The official culture of organization is the system of meanings, values and norms espoused by the managerial dominant coalition; the unofficial culture or cultures of an organization are the systems of meanings, values and norms actually prevailing in the organization.”

In order to keep the official culture as close as possible to the unofficial one management will develop a discourse, which is designed to persuade people to work together. Such a discourse is, “a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitutes a way of talking or writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue” (Watson, 1994, p. 113). Language and power are therefore not devoid from each other, but the more the manager is able to provide a narrative which is not only persuasive but also convincing in the sense that consensus will be reached the lesser a kind of power play will be at stake. In that sense management language is meant to mobilize people into networks for knowledge sharing, team learning and consensual cooperation. In order to do so managers are supposed to demonstrate communicative and participative competences (Holden, 2002, p. 273).

Managers who manifest these competencies are able to frame meaning and socially construct reality for themselves and the other participants in the organization. Talking with others in that way makes managers good conversationalists. These managers develop scripts, which are built upon the frames that prevail in an organization. Whereas the framing involves communications that shape the general perspective upon which information is presented and interpreted, scripts are “the emergent guides for collective consciousness and interactions that are sufficiently circumspect to provide cues for behaviour when unexpected events occur, and yet flexible enough to permit improvisation” (Gardner and Avalio, 1998, p. 41).

Management concepts ranging from management by objectives (MBO) to total quality management (TQM) and business process re-engineering (BPR) have become highly attractive ways to develop a script. Over the last 25 years a whole range of management concepts, typically originating in the US, have spread across the industrialized world. “They have typically followed the lifecycle of a fashion, moving from being the preserve of exclusive pioneers through to mass-market penetration before tapering off” (Mueller and Carter, 2005, p. 221).

These management concepts can play a significant role in scripting the prevailing discourse in an organization. Usually managers draw upon various forms of rhetorical crafting, including stories, to convince the others to actively participate in the implementation of a particular management concept in the organization. Management concepts generally are introduced with an exhortation script that is meant to de-legitimize the traditional way of doing things in business. With the latest management concept at hand a new way of working is propagated.

Quite often managers are assisted by management consultancies to craft the storyline. These consultants have built a reputation in translating a particular concept into a commodifiable, programmed change initiative and diffuse it to as many organizations as possible. It is, however, up to the managers themselves to translate the same concept into a particular one, which can be transferred to the prevailing organizational practice (Holden, 2002). The purpose of the translation of a management is to create a new company practice but its success depends on the legitimations the manager can provide. Green (2004) stresses that justifications can take many different forms but he proposes to distinguish three main types: pathos, logos and ethos:

- (1) Pathos justifications impact emotions. They are passionate appeals to an audience's self interest. The appeals made excite to the imagination and direct behavior away from the status quo.
- (2) Legitimizations based on logos justify actions by appealing to the desire for efficient/effective practices. They require methodical calculation of means and ends.
- (3) Legitimation based on ethos justify actions by referring to socially accepted norms and mores.

Whereas pathos and logos justifications emphasize individual concerns and interests, ethos appeals "focus on the social and collective interests" (Green, 2004, p. 660). In any discourse, dialogue or conversation all three types of legitimation do play a role.

It is interesting to notice that management concepts demonstrate congruity with these three types of justification. Initially they are introduced by referring to legitimations based on pathos. Providers/creators of these concepts usually deliver a concept under the aegis of a new acronym or another striking label which formulates a particular organizational issue as an irresolute but pressing problem which managers will easily recognize.

In the context of a logos justification management concepts demonstrate another characteristic. They offer a very general solution to identified problems. They do not, however, provide constitutive rules which prescribe specific actions to be taken but deliver general guidelines that will bring about an increase in efficiency or effectiveness. These guidelines suggest a standard of conduct (protocols) and propel action in a certain direction.

The ethos appeals refer to the success stories about specific well-known firms

that have either developed or have implemented the concept. General Motors, IBM, Shell or Toyota are usually portrayed as convincing examples of the success of a concept. The examples are particular narratives i.e. evidence based stories (Sorge and van Witteloostuijn, 2004) which articulate the knowledge employed in particular situations which subsequently through scripts of routinization become embedded into new practices (De Long and Fahey, 2000).

Habermas (1984, 1987) has linked these three types of justifications to three validity claims: pathos - truthfulness; logos - truth; ethos – rightness. These validity claims shed a particular light on the way a manager can reach consensus through dialogue/conversation with other organizational stakeholders. A conversation is a kind of communicative action, which is usually defined as a range of actions towards agreement or mutual understanding (*Verständigung*). The goal of communicative action is to coordinate the speech acts of the participants. Habermas' focus is on the pragmatic aspect of language i.e. how language is used in particular contexts to achieve practical goals. While consultants talk about a management concept in an “experience-distant way” the managers on the other hand talk about the same management concept in an “experience-near” way. Managers prefer to deal with concepts in a perceptual way and look for applicability (Geertz, 1979). Within the context of social interaction Habermas, however, draws an important distinction.

To achieve the practical goal of implementing a management concept, however, social interactions can be divided in strategic and communicative ones. If a manager persuades her subordinates to accept a management concept without mutual understanding, but for example “misleads” them to implement the concept, then force – a power relation – determines the means of coordination. In strategic action the manager strives at her own private goal without restraint. What matters for the manager is how she can use the employees to realize her own private goal by “selling the concept”. This practice is called a hampered conversation.

In the situation of communicative action the manager as well as the subordinates comprehend and accept the relevance of the validity claims through which the importance of a management concept is being presented. They will then jointly implement the management concept, which then includes as much a set of speech acts as the material act of implementation.

The communication model Habermas has developed is of interest because it makes us realise that, for the validity of a management concept, it is not enough to only focus on its propositional truth. Management concepts are full of storytelling and their impact cannot solely be judged on their claim of truth alone. The knowledge that a management concept contains also has to be understood in terms of rightfulness (ethos) and truthfulness (pathos).

Conversations contain pathos, logos and ethos justifications and as “talk-in-interactions” they reflect the workplace as a linguistically constituted community in the sense that there always is: an explicit enactor i.e. the manager, but that it

is the community of standard enactors, who actually implement a management concept. In the absence of such a community the enactment would be undefined and would thus not exist as enactment (Taylor and Every, 2000, p. 270).

Taylor and Every (2000) notice that in the dominant Anglo-American management literature the perspective to perceive enactors as a strategic means to reach a goal is still prevalent. The now popular talk about employees as human resources typifies this approach. People are just another resource to meet the objectives of the instrumental organization. Within such a context, communication is limited to its strategic version.

Jackson (2004, pp. 26-28) studying African management practices has introduced a humanistic view of people to oppose this strategic view. According to this view people are seen as having a value in their own right and an end in themselves. *Ubuntu* encapsulates this approach. Even if it may sound somewhat idealistic – as Jackson says – “to try to identify a particular African style or even philosophy of management (...), any description of management systems within Africa should include a consideration of an indigenous African management”. And *Ubuntu* seems to reflect this approach.

### ***Ubuntu* as a management concept**

After the political changes resulting in the 1994 election of Nelson Mandela to become the new president of South Africa, it became increasingly evident that the South African business community needed to transform as well. *Ubuntu* as well as other dimensions of African culture were introduced as positive resources for catalyzing the business transformation in South Africa. It was put forward that in order to attain this transformation the interconnectedness in community as a key characteristic of the African way of thinking should be seen as starting point (Nussbaum, 2003).

In the African tradition, it is the community that defines the person as person. *Ubuntu* as a translation of the Xhosa expression “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” means the person is a person through other persons, and this expresses a typical African conception of a person. *Ubuntu* provides a strong philosophical base for the community concept of management (Khoza, 1994). Mbigi (1997) has listed the following relevant principles of *Ubuntu*: the spirit of unconditional African collective contribution, solidarity, acceptance, dignity, stewardship, compassion and care, hospitality and legitimacy. *Ubuntu* is an African worldview that is rooted and anchored in people’s daily life. The expression of a person as a person through persons is “common to all African languages and traditional cultures” (Shutte, 1993, p. 46). *Ubuntu* is a symbol of an African common life-world and the concept has namesakes in different terms in African countries. Ramose (1999) made a relevant remark by saying: “African philosophy has long been established in and through *Ubuntu*. That here not only the Bantu speaking ethnic groups, who use the word *Ubuntu* or an equivalent for it, are referred to, but the whole population of Sub-Saharan Africa, is based on the argument that in this area

“there is a family atmosphere, that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa”. In West Africa, more in particular in Senegal, the concept of “Teranga” reflects a similar spirit of collective hospitality between people. Zimbabwe’s concept of “Ubukhosi” also mirrors itself metaphorically in the statement “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”. Research in Eritrea shows how modern HRM practices in large Eritrea firms have to be embedded in the tradition of communally shared responsibilities (Ghebregiorgis and Karsten, 2005). There are apparently similarities between these concepts and that of *Ubuntu*, which reflects an African view on community, and is embedded in customs, institutions and traditions (Karsten and Illa, 2004).

According to Shutte (1993), *Ubuntu* is not synonymous with either Western individualism or collectivism. *Ubuntu* expresses an African view of the life world anchored in its own person, culture and society, which is difficult to define in a Western context. According to Sanders (1999), the Zulu phrase “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” has an economy of singular and plural not captured in the banal “people are people through other people”. The translation of *Ubuntu* can sound like “a human being is a human being through human beings or the being human of a human being is noticed through his or her being human through human beings [. . .]. The ontological figure of *Ubuntu* is commonly converted into an example and imperative for human conduct”. *Ubuntu* is enacted in African day-to-day actions, feelings and thinking. The African community as a social entity, however, is constantly under construction. It is an attempt to shape indigenous social and political institutions, which will be able to develop African nations and African civil societies. It is this atmosphere *Ubuntu* tries to encapsulate.

Although *Ubuntu* represents a specific African worldview, Mbigi (1997) is convinced that it nevertheless can be translated to what he calls The African Dream in Management. *Ubuntu* refers to the collective solidarity in Africa but it can become convertible in other modern forms of entrepreneurship, leadership, business organizations and management. The introduction of *Ubuntu* as a management concept will not replace the transfer of knowledge, like management concepts, from the Western world but can support the development of a hybrid management system operating in Africa within which these Western concepts can find their proper African translation. A proper African management system – like the American and Japanese ones – may generate a variety of management styles as distinctive sets of guidelines, written or otherwise, “which set parameters to add signposts for managerial action in the way employees are treated and particular events are handled”(Purcell, 1987, p. 535).

*Ubuntu* as a management concept intends to be more than just a popular version of an employee participation programme defined by the interest of management. *Ubuntu* is the label that covers the way company members interact and share experiences. In that sense *Ubuntu* fits the socialization process as described by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) during which tacit knowledge becomes shared. *Ubuntu* reflects a particular kind of commitment and loyalty to the social group



which demonstrates similarities with Japanese practices (Glisby and Holden, 2003). *Ubuntu* therefore strives to reach beyond a purely managerial approach and strengthens an attitude of open conversations like Habermas propagates. In that sense *Ubuntu* reflects a critical discourse because it includes the voice of all participants in the organization and the building of consensus. Similarities with consensus building in the indigenous African political system are striking. Storytelling, inclusive decision-making and participatory community meetings are key features in traditional rural African communities. “Coercive powers were generally not employed by the chief to achieve unity. Unity of purpose was achieved through the process of consensus building” (Ayittey, 1991, p. 100). Majority of opinion did not count in the council of elders: unanimity was the rule. In face-to-face communities in control of their own destinies these “wisdom circles” were widespread. In these wisdom circles people rarely engage in direct response to what is said with argument and debate. “Rather what is sought is a deepening of *Ubuntu* understanding and the spontaneous emergence of a solution or decision” (Glock-Grueneich, 2003, p. 36). Although these qualities of the rural cultures continue to have an important role in the urban context, it has been difficult to introduce the traditional form of wisdom circles in modern instrumental organizations. Nevertheless, a modified version can certainly help to shape an *Ubuntu* approach in firms.

Scepticism about a suggested prevalence of *Ubuntu* in African companies, however, cannot be denied. Jackson (2004) indicates that African organizational cultures and management styles with a predominantly strategic orientation are widely present and some of these management styles are often seen as rigid, bureaucratic, directive and task-oriented. Wal and Ramotschoa (2001, p. 4) notice that *Ubuntu* is sometimes popularised in business books reflecting the tendency to align it with productivity improvement and worker motivation techniques, which reduces its significance “to flavour of the month status”. They urge to prevent *Ubuntu* from quickly obtaining a faddish character and believe that “*Ubuntu* embraces a set of social behaviours like sharing, seeking consensus and interdependent helpfulness which, if recognised, valued and willingly incorporated in the culture of organizations, could exert considerable positive outcomes on business results”. Wal and Ramotschoa’s fear should not be related to *Ubuntu* as a management concept, but to the context in which it is applied. The issue is whether managers will use it for managerialist purposes or as the basis for communicative action leading to shared perspectives. The purpose of *Ubuntu* as a societal value is to reshape social relations in African society and in African workplaces. Managers who are good conversationalists will share *Ubuntu* as a concept that can free workplaces from one sided, instrumental approaches of human beings and create an atmosphere of cultural harmony. If for whatever reason managers deny this purpose, they will indeed limit *Ubuntu* as a management concept to a strategic i.e. managerialist use for specific goals they have defined themselves (Rwelamila et al., 1999). Habermas (1984, 1987) describes such an approach as strategic action where the diagnosis and the solution of a problem within the organization is not being shared and commonly performed by all participants. It then is a

prerogative of management to set the objectives and forces others to simply accept them. In such situations management concepts are only used for strategic purposes. *Ubuntu*, however, is based on communicative action and managers embracing *Ubuntu* support that form of social interaction.

In line with what has been said about the way concepts are being translated to the firm, one can notice that the legitimation of *Ubuntu* has strong moral overtones. It is being defended as a new view on business based on a concept, which is anchored in a long-standing cultural tradition. Part of the discourse about *Ubuntu* contains strong appeals referring to pathos. It has obtained a striking label and has raised in general terms a specific management issue. “Black managers and professionals need to develop a strong sense of collective social stewardship [ . . . ]. We need a strong sense of collective, social citizenship” (Mbigi, 1997, p. 38). The tendency to establish solidarity will build “a culture of empowerment and team work in the workplace” (Mbigi, 1997, p. 5).

When we look at the logos appeal it is clear that *Ubuntu* is meant to improve the efficient and effective operations of workplaces in the South African context. Constitutive rules to attain such a goal of improved efficiency are not available, but the success stories compensate a lot.

Literature begins to provide numerous success stories, but none of them seems yet to reach the status of the key success story. There is for example the case of Durban Metrorail, which adopted *Ubuntu* as one of its guiding principles and made the company the Most Progressive Company in Kwazulu-Natal<sup>1</sup>. Patricia and Scheraga (1998) on the other hand consider the South African Airway to be the best example to illustrate how a major non-American corporation uses the various dimensions of *Ubuntu*. Another interesting case for the implementation of *Ubuntu* is CS Holdings<sup>2</sup>. The staff of CS Holdings believes that “the reputation of a company as perceived by the market is as important as the actual services rendered by the company”. CS Holdings obtained its reputation as a new South African IT company, which forms alliances with firms such as *Ubuntu* Technologies to provide “expertise and knowledge exchange as well as some infrastructure, enabling *Ubuntu* Technologies to tender for business from which they were previously excluded”. The integration of *Ubuntu* guidelines made it possible for CS Holdings to improve its management style and its performance and integrate these guidelines into routines and daily practices as normal attitudes.

Even if a positive impact of *Ubuntu* guidelines can be contested, Chancock (2000) is right that the need to fight for different experiences, as they are reflected in other organizational cultures like in Japan, is even greater for vulnerable indigenous communities in a global economy where Western views still dominate. Regardless of the fact that *Ubuntu* can be abused for political reasons, it should be acknowledged, that an indigenous African management system is in its hybrid phase and that there is a tendency of “crossvergence” which can support the development of a particular value system as a result of cultural interactions (Jackson, 2004, p. 30). The hegemony of the modernist Western management approach generally has ignored those local cultural values. In the process of

changing that modernist perspective, *Ubuntu* may provide a solution to the problems African workplaces face.

### ***Ubuntu* as a new managerial habitus**

Actors who converse engage in actions interwoven with various social forms of life. It is impossible to dissociate the meanings and purposes of speakers put forward in a discourse from the background of these conversations which contain an open network of mental states of speakers such as desires, intentions and beliefs directed at facts and states of affairs as well as series of speaker's abilities and practiced relating to their common forms of life (Searle, 1969). This context or background is structured and enabled by social conditions, not the least of which is the socially learned practice of speaking a language. Habermas had called this the life-world, the stock of implicit assumptions, intuitive know-how and socially established practices that function as a background to all understanding. This "horizon-forming context of communication" (Habermas, 1985, p. 165) is composed of society, culture and individual.

In its exhortation script *Ubuntu* is being introduced as a management concept which reaches beyond purely economic criteria of efficiency/effectiveness to include the African life world in African business practices. *Ubuntu* intends to step away from the discourse that historically has pervaded the South African business community. Frequent reference is made to TQM as the example of a concept that introduced empowerment, customer service and charismatic leadership in Japanese firms. In contrast to the western view which looks at labour as a commodity sold, bought and bartered like other goods, the Japanese emphasize through TQM that labour is recognized as human and not just a piece of property that is valued solely by market forces (Kinzberg, 1991). Shigoto labour is seen as a process of accumulating knowledge in a firm (Kaicha) that literally means a societal clan having as its purpose the reproduction of its population (Michalon, 2003). Like TQM *Ubuntu* envisages a different view on instrumental organizations. It intends to bridge the gap between official and unofficial organizational cultures.

Being able to speak the language of *Ubuntu* is crucial, but not enough to improve the performative attitude of a manager interacting with others. The performative attitude implies that she is able to integrate in her actions the three-validity claims of truth, rightness and truthfulness. Bourdieu (1990) has called this performative attitude the *Habitus* – a concept to link linguistic practices to the broader social sphere. *Ubuntu* can shape a fundamental part of the dispositional practice of managers, that is, part of their *Habitus*. *Habitus* relates a collection of embodied mental, intellectual, ethical and even esthetical dispositions of an actor to his/her social background, which subsequently establishes his/her own practice in different social fields. It denotes the capabilities individuals possess which are revealed by their exercise as dispositions to act. These dispositions are by definition behavioural, but emotional, physical and mental dispositions can be distinguished. *Habitus* is studied through a variety of practices by which

it is revealed (Nash, 2005). *Habitus* enables “an infinite number of moves to be made, adapted to the infinite number of possible situations which no rule, however complex, can foresee” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 9). *Ubuntu* can shape a new *Habitus* which indicates how managers as actors share with others a life-world and its practices, even if there are between them asymmetrical social positions and relations of domination (Bohman, 1999).

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p. 152) define Bourdieu’s *Habitus* as “a kind of socially constructed principle of regulated improvisation in which tradition and creativity intersect to create new knowledge”. In the context of this article we might say that *Ubuntu* can create a new *Habitus* through which African managers familiarize with a specific traditional life-world and create through conversations and dialogues new African business practices. The actors who jointly converse about *Ubuntu* as a concept “will bring their own views, thoughts, and emotions to the table, and the meaning of the concept itself will change through this group process” (Von Krogh et al., 2000, p. 88). The meaning of *Ubuntu* ultimately is accepted when all three validity claims are shared. Although judgments about the truth, rightness and truthfulness of a concept may seem very far away from business concerns, they play a role in creating something truly innovative (Von Krogh et al., 2000). Conversations as described in this article may fit the epistemology of practice that Cook and Brown (1999) are striving for. They engage participants in an effective exchange of relevant and appropriate information to finally reach a mutual understanding about what has to be done and how it should be done. Once that stage will be reached *Ubuntu* will lead to (scripts of) routinization. It will no longer be “executed only if consciously planned but has become part of routine and normality” (Mueller and Carter, 2005, p. 233).

## Conclusion

Nussbaum (2003, p. 7) is convinced that business practices, which are truly infused with *Ubuntu*, can lead to a new business paradigm, which frees “work-places in the west from the tyranny of soulless technical professionalism and the culture of emotional denial at work”. In a similar vein Jackson reasons by stating that within the African context a humanistic view of management may develop which sees employees as having a value in their own right. This view distances itself from the strategic view in organizations, which only perceives people as a means to an end. *Ubuntu* encapsulates this humanistic view and for that reason is attracting quite some attention. *Ubuntu* is being positioned as a new way to strengthen economic revitalization of Africa. To attain that goal a proper management system operating in Africa is quintessential. Mangaliso is of the opinion that to that end the craze for efficiency and accuracy of language has to be countered by an emphasis on conversation. It is presupposed that African managers will better master a relationally responsive understanding than Western managers, while these latter are only professionally trained as accountable persons and manage employees accordingly in a strategic way. Mangaliso refers

to a distinction between accuracy of language at the one hand and conversation at the other. This article has argued that it is not language as such which is at stake, but only the version that logical positivism developed and that found its way in Taylorism and Fordism. Since a focus on discourse and dialogue has entered the field of management- and organization studies, this view of language begins to be revised. The pragmatic theory of communicative action provides an interesting basis to relate the issue of language to that of conversations.

Once African management consultants will translate *Ubuntu* into a commodifiable, programmed change initiative to diffuse it in Africa and other places in the world, it can run the risk of falling victim to the lifecycle of so many fads and fashions in management literature. *Ubuntu*, however, is often compared with TQM as a label that reflected how Japanese firms were able to shape their own company practices. This label stressed the importance of quality as a shared responsibility in any firm. As such it did not disappear from the management language but became an integral part of it. *Ubuntu* may obtain the same results while it stresses the urgent need for interconnectedness, conviviality and harmony in workplaces. In order to be translated and converted into a proper manner Holden (2002) emphasizes the role of cross-cultural management. Managers need to develop cross-cultural communicative competencies – a *savoir-faire* – to enable a conducive and collaborative atmosphere in companies, which strengthens the values, *Ubuntu* stands for. These values do not reflect a fixed human nature. Diversity in organizations has shown clearly that that cannot be the case. But it does indicate that actors in organizations have some common nature, which in some cultures is more respected than in others. This common human nature makes intercommunication possible. That is what *Ubuntu* tries to express as a pathway of understanding and living our common humanity.

## Notes

1. Durban Metrorail is a South African company of public transport. It had received a place of success during the Black Management Forum in 1999, for the most Progressive Company in Kwazulu-Natal.
2. CS Holdings is a South African IT firm. More information available at: [www.cs.co.za/reconstructionand\\_development.htm](http://www.cs.co.za/reconstructionand_development.htm)

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