

# **Equalising Power, Respecting Differences and Changing the Conversation: Using a Discourse Lens to Explore Collective Dimensions of Leadership-in- Interaction**

Anne Murphy  
*Lancaster University*

## **Abstract**

The quantity and breadth of theoretical work in Leadership Studies which focuses on collective dimensions of leadership is growing (Ospina & Foldy, 2015). The concept offers a big tent for scholars whose work addresses different aspects of 'leadership in the plural' (Denis et al., 2012). This work offers a rich conceptual mix from many schools of thought including Relational Leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006), Leadership-as-practice (Raelin, 2016a), critical approaches (Collinson, 2014), Discursive Leadership (Fairhurst, 2007), networked approaches to leadership (Ospina & Foldy, 2015), and including notions of distributed, shared and collaborative leadership. More recently scholars have begun to consider commensurate research designs and methods to instantiate these ideas and strengthen the empirical base of the work (Ospina et al., 2017). Discourse analytic approaches represent one such development.

Discourse analysts working from a number of subdisciplines of Linguistics such as Critical Discourse Analysis (for example, Wodak et al. 2011), Sociolinguistics (for example, Holmes & Marra, 2004, Schnurr, 2009) and Conversation Analysis (for example Clifton, 2006, 2012) have turned their attention to leadership. However much of this work takes an individual leader as the analytical point of entry. Against this backdrop further work from a leadership-in-interaction perspective (for example, Clifton, 2017; Larsson et al., 2018; Larson & Lundholm, 2010; Schnurr & Chan, 2011) is taking the research implications of the collective dimensions of leadership seriously by applying a fine-grained discursive analytical lens to the collective construction process. This paper makes a contribution to this stream of work.

Combining a dual perspective of organisation studies and discourse analysis, two interconnected questions guide the research:

1. What collective leadership practices and behaviours are identified in the literatures of organisation and discourse studies?
2. What can be learnt about these collective dimensions of leadership from the closest study of interactional data?

The paper firstly explores key literature on collective dimensions of leadership, synthesising perspectives from organisation studies and discourse studies, before setting out the methodology and approach to data. Early findings are discussed next and expected developments and implications presented.

A first comparative reading of a number of Leadership Studies and Discourse Studies articles which explore aspects of collective leadership, yields five interconnected and overlapping themes. The five themes are power, difference, identity, meaning and conversation. Key literature reviewed includes work from scholars working from a leadership and organisation perspective (for example, Fletcher, 2004, 2012; Ospina, 2017; Ospina & Foldy, 2015; Pearce & Conger, 2004; Raelin, 2016b, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Yammarino et al., 2012) as well as scholars whose work takes a discursive approach (for example, Clifton, 2006, 2012, 2014; Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Holmes, 2005; Holmes et al., 1999; Schnurr & Chan, 2011; Schnurr & Zyats, 2012; Vine et al., 2008; Wodak et al., 2011.) The disciplines approach the topic with different questions and different traditions of interacting with data. Organisation scholars often seek alternative ways of conceptualising leadership which are not wholly dependent on identification of a leader embodied in a single individual. Discourse scholars for whom achieving shared meaning is always a conjoint activity, tend to be more interested in fine-grained analysis of empirical interactive data. In spite of these not inconsiderable differences, strong areas of connection and agreement emerge. These are summarised before a selection and more detailed exploration of three of these key themes is

made. The selection, informed by meeting participant orientations to power (Murphy, 2017) and views of difference (Deering & Murphy, 1998) are synthesised as 'equalising power, respecting differences and changing the conversation'.

The paper is informed methodologically by linguistic ethnography (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Rampton, 2007; Rampton, Maybin & Roberts, 2014; Snell et al., 2015; Tusting & Maybin, 2007) which combines an ethnographic, field-based approach to investigating and comprehending tacit and articulated understandings of participants' perspectives and activities, with the empirical procedures and analytical tools of linguistics. The data analysed in this paper are organised around the notion, or research object, of the work professionals do to change ideas and practices around leadership. They are selected from a corpus of interviews, participant observation (workshops), field notes and 15 hours of recorded and transcribed one-to-one and meeting interactions. This selection comprises field notes taken during a day's shadowing of a senior manager during a strategy day involving professionals from across the business, alongside 87 minutes of audio recorded, and later transcribed, interactional data from four syndicate group meetings convened to discuss different aspects of a strategic challenge. Taking the three broad areas of interest identified above as 'directions along which to look' (Blumer, [1969] 1986, p.148), the interactional data are analysed using movement or changes in direction in the conversation (and not leaders) as focal points in order to identify relevant episodes of talk. These episodes are further analysed using the tools of Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982) specifically the notion of contextualisation cues (Gumperz, 1982, 1999) to explore how leadership is read off particular linguistic devices and conversational moves. I suggest this reading shapes and is shaped by fleeting and instantaneous interpretations of power relationships in their process of instantiation.

The paper makes comparisons and connections between organisation and discourse orientations to studying collective dimensions of leadership. Two related areas of interest are identified from the analysis: first how leadership is 'read off' specific conversational moves and second, what kind of leadership this is deemed to be. The data show that equalising/defending power, respecting/minimising differences, and changing/containing the conversation are useful framing devices to help articulate collective dynamics involved in the construction of leadership.

## References

Blommaert, J. & Rampton, B. (2011). Language and superdiversity. *Diversities* 13(2), 3-21.

Blumer, H. ([1969] 1986). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Berkeley; London: University of California Press.

Clifton, J. (2006). A conversation analytical approach to business communication: The case of leadership. *Journal of Business Communication*, 43(3), 202-219.

Clifton, J. (2014). Being in the Know: Socio-epistemics and the communicative constitution of a management team. *Organization Management Journal*, 11(1), 4-14.

Clifton, J. (2012). A discursive approach to leadership: Doing assessments and managing organizational meanings. *Journal of Business Communication*, 49(2), 148-168.

Clifton, J. (2017). Leaders as ventriloquists. Leader identity and influencing the communicative construction of the organisation. *Leadership*, 13(3), 301-319.

Collinson, D. (2014). Dichotomies, dialectics and dilemmas: New directions for critical leadership studies? *Leadership* 10(1), 36-55.

Deering, A., & Murphy, A. (1998). *The difference engine : Achieving powerful and sustainable partnering*. Aldershot, UK; Brookfield, VT: Gower.

Denis, J.L., Langley, A. and Sergi, V. (2012). Leadership in the plural. *Academy of Management Annals*, 6(1), 211-283.

Fairhurst, G.T. (2007). Discursive leadership. In conversation with leadership psychology. Los Angeles: Sage.

Fairhurst, G.T & Uhl Bien, M. (2012): Organisation discourse analysis (ODA): Examining leadership as a relational process. *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol.23(6): 1043-1062.

Fletcher, J. (2004). The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(5), 647-661.

Gumperz, J. (1982). *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gumperz, J. (1999). On interactional sociolinguistic method. In Srikant Sarangi and Celia Roberts (eds) *Talk, Work and Institutional Order*, (pp 453-472). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Holmes, J. (2005). Leadership talk: How do leaders 'do mentoring', and is gender relevant? *Journal of Pragmatics: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language Studies* 37(11), 1779-1800.

Holmes, J. & Marra, M. (2004). Leadership and managing conflict in meetings. *Pragmatics*, 14, 439-62.

Holmes, J., Stubbe, M. & Vine, B. (1999). Constructing professional identity: 'Doing power' in policy units. In Sarangi, S., & Roberts, C. (Eds.). *Talk, work, and institutional order: Discourse in medical, mediation, and management settings*, (pp. 351-387). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Larsson, M. & Lundholm, S. (2010). Talking work in a bank: A study of organizing properties of leadership in work interactions. *Human Relations* 66(8), 1101-1129.

Larsson, M., Schnurr, S. & Clifton, J. (2018). Leadership special issue on leadership-ininteraction. Call for papers. *Leadership* 14(1), 134-136.

Murphy, A. (2017). *Taking power: Women's experiences of workplace conversations in Cunningham, C., Crandall, H. & Dare, A. (eds.) Gender, communication and the leadership gap*, (pp. 69-88). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Ospina, S. & Foldy, E.G. (2015). Enacting collective leadership in a shared power world. In James Perry & Robert Christensen (eds.) *Handbook of Public Administration*, 3rd ed., (pp489—507). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Ospina, S., Foldy, G., Fairhurst, G.T. & Jackson, B. (2017). Collective dimensions of leadership: The challenges of connecting theory and method. Special issue call for papers. *Human Relations*, 70(12), 1551.

Raelin, J. (2016)a. *Leadership-as-practice [electronic resource] : Theory and application* (Routledge studies in leadership research ; 2). New York ; London: Routledge.

Raelin, J. (2016)b. Imagine there are no leaders: Reframing leadership as collaborative agency. *Leadership*, 12(2), 131-158.

Raelin, J. (2018). What are you afraid of: Collective leadership and its learning implications. *Management Learning*, 49(1), 59-66.

Rampton, B. (2007): Neo-Hymesian linguistic ethnography in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11(5), 584-607.

Rampton, B., Maybin, J. & Roberts, C. (2014). Theory and method in linguistic ethnography. In Snell, J., Shaw, S., & Copland, F. (Eds.) *Linguistic ethnography: Interdisciplinary explorations*, (pp. 14 - 50). Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schnurr, S. (2009). Constructing leader identities through teasing at work. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(6), 1125-1138.

Schnurr, S. & Chan, A (2011). Exploring another side of co-leadership: Negotiating professional identities through face-work in disagreement. *Language in Society* 40,187-209.

Schnurr, S. & Zyats, O. (2012). Be(com)ing a leader: A case study of co-constructing professional identities at work. In: Angouri J and Marra M (eds) *Constructing Identities at Work*, (pp40-60). Houndsill, Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan.

Snell, J. Shaw, S. & Copland, F. (eds.) (2015). *Linguistic ethnography: Interdisciplinary explorations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tusting, K., & Maybin, J. (2007). Linguistic ethnography and interdisciplinarity: Opening the discussion. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 11(5), 575-583.

Uhl-Bien, M. (2006). Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), 654-676.

Vine, B., Holmes, J., Marra, M., Pfeifer, D., & Jackson, B. (2008). Exploring co-leadership talk through interactional sociolinguistics. *Leadership*, 4(3), 339-360.

Wodak, R., Kwon, W., & Clarke, I. (2011). 'Getting people on board': Discursive leadership for consensus building in team meetings. *Discourse & Society*, 22(2), 592-644.

Yammarino, F.J., Salas, E., Serban, A., Shirreffs, K., & Shuffler, M. (2012). Collectivistic leadership approaches: Putting the “we” in leadership science and practice. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 5 (2012), 382-402.