Labels, metaphors, and platitudes are linguistic artifacts that organizational leaders produce, steal, borrow, or buy from consultants for a high price. Studies on organizational change indicate that such linguistic artifacts are used as control tools and instruments of change. They enable leaders to manage meaning by explaining, coloring, and familiarizing, as opposed to traditional change and control methods—commanding, rewarding, and punishing. The article analyzes organizational use of linguistic artifacts through theoretical discussion and empirical examples.

# HOW TO CONTROL THINGS WITH WORDS
## Organizational Talk and Control

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This article uses the methods of grounded theory to explore the uses of linguistic artifacts as tools of control in organizations. In particular, it uses examples from several empirical studies to demonstrate the uses of labels, metaphors, and platitudes in organizations. Labels can be used to promote change or to stigmatize. Metaphors can help employees understand changes and can promote new managerial philosophies and values. Both can be imported from outside the organization and the country. Platitudes can serve as instruments of control in times of change by reducing uncertainty.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Empirical studies of change in organizations usually concentrate on one of two issues. One is change in work quality caused

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by the introduction of new material artifacts, that is production machinery, especially machine tools (see, e.g., Noble, 1984) and lately robotics and data processing. This is, traditionally, the central concern of industrial sociology and, to an extent, industrial relations studies. Another is change in administrative and control structures, a traditional object of interest for organization theory.

More recently, organization research has been greatly enriched by social constructivist approaches. One outcome of this are studies of actors' accounts of their work, more precisely, their accounts as work, inspired by ethnomethodological tradition (e.g., Silverman & Jones, 1976; Latour & Woolgar, 1979). In this article we propose to follow another avenue, more in the tradition of organizational symbolism (as formulated originally by Turner, 1971): organizational talk as both the use of verbal symbols in an attempt to structure meaning and as actions based on this meaning. We focus on "talk as control," rather than "talk as production" process.

We shall discuss types of linguistic artifacts used in organizations in view of their control functions. Can "devices" such as labels, metaphors, and platitudes be put to specific control uses by members of organizations who are exerting power? Can it be shown that there is "order" in such phenomena, in the sense not only of specificity of function, but of interrelatedness within broader contexts of organizational control?

Our point of departure will be a series of empirical studies on central control processes in Swedish businesses and public administration: a study on managerial control in a Swedish corporation (SF AB) (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988), governmental control over public agencies (Czarniawska, 1985), and of the Submunicipal Committee reform in Swedish municipalities (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1987). In these, and similarly in studies of other organizational processes (see especially Brunsson, 1986, and Rombach, 1986), it emerged from organizational actors' accounts that what we began to call "organizational talk" constitutes a specific, and crucial, organizational activity. Silverman and Jones (1976) showed organizational actors accounting for selection and promotion rules and

simultaneously creating them in a series of conversations. In their study, talk is seen as the tool of personnel management. In the discussion below, talk is seen as control instrument, the use of which becomes especially visible at times of change.

A word about method. In a sense, this is an analysis of residual material from several studies. The inductive, theory-building approach taken in the empirical research mentioned above tends to reach a stage at which theories explaining the phenomena under study are substantially "ready," and still many findings remain unexploited. They may point to other phenomena yet unexplored, to alternative interpretations, or to promising new research questions. But as such new threads develop from empirical work, an intermediate step, one that offers some conceptual cleansing without closing, is required in order to know better where to go next. This article is an attempt in this direction. Though shifting attention from empirical data to conceptual literature, we have retained the methodological stance of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1974; Glaser 1978). Instead of attempting full overviews of possibly relevant literature, we approached various fields in an attitude of theoretical sampling, stopping at the point of theoretical satiation.

As we looked into disciplinary fields and schools of thought in which relevant theorizing can be expected and tried to minimize and maximize differences, we moved from organizational theory to social psychology to sociolinguistics to semiotics and cultural history. We do not attempt to give fair representations of these fields as they relate to language in general. Rather we took what helped us to understand the phenomenon in question: organizational talk as a control instrument. In fact, the criterion of theoretical satiation proved easier to apply at this level than in empirical analysis. There are, for instance, innumerable works on metaphor, a theme very much "in" at present, but there are only a few main concepts that are varied according to the special interests of their authors.

The result is in keeping with yet another tenet of grounded theory, namely that conceptualizations may be written down at any stage in their development and that theoretical modeling should go hand in hand with empirical validation.

## LINGUISTIC ARTIFACTS IN ORGANIZATIONAL TALK

Talk is social action, in the sense that it is composed of intentional human acts taking place between actors within a given social order (Giddens, 1981; 1984; Harre, 1982; Harre and Secord, 1976; Jonsson, 1982; Sabini and Silver, 1982). Talk can thus be seen as a subtype, a special kind of social action defined as *the use of language in intentional acts of communication.* Such an explication associates talk with *rhetoric*—which, however, stresses mainly formal aspects of talk—and even more with *discourse.* Nevertheless, the latter term can be used synonymously with organizational talk only when kept on the "middle ground," as Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) put it, between the sociolinguistic and the sociostructural approaches to discourse analysis.

Organizational talk is action taken within the social order of an organization. It consists of forming linkages between the cultural context of organizing (Czarniawska, 1986) and organizational symbols, among various organizational symbols, and between organizational symbols and organizational reality. Talk joins together the practical and the expressive orders (Harre, 1981) or the orders of "work" and "desire" (Scarry, 1985) of organizational life, thereby providing a multitude of organizational events with meaning.

Elements of organizational talk can be shared or refused by members of an organization, indicating the degree to which members have become included in a common order. By the same token, organizational talk can be modified and infused with elements that are aimed at creating or changing such

order. Here we are mainly interested in this latter process of the introduction of linguistic devices for purposes of organizational control. More specifically, we have asked how three prototypical devices—labels, metaphors, and platitudes—which are used to build shared meaning in organizations, can also be constructed and turned into implements of organizational control processes.

## LABELS, METAPHORS, AND PLATITUDES

Let us start with a commonsensical distinction. Labels tell *what* things are: They classify. Metaphors say *how* things are: They sensitize, give life. Platitudes establish *what is normal*: They conventionalize. How then can these initial notions be differentiated? Are these broad linguistic types used as devices in organizational talk related to control? In what sense can they be considered artifacts—that is, things designed, produced, and used as control tools, much like other organizational artifacts?

### LABELS

> The object and its aspects depend upon organization; and labels of all sorts are tools of organization. . . A representation or description, by virtue of how it classifies and is classified, may make or mark connections, analyze objects, and organize the world. (Goodman, 1968, p. 32)

Labels are the most familiar element of organizational talk. Recognition came initially from the political sciences: labeling, as the linguistic structuring of (social) problems, is a powerful means of influence by language.

> Political and ideological debate consists very largely of efforts to win acceptance of a particular categorization of an issue in the face of competing efforts in behalf of a different one;

> but because participants are likely to see it as a dispute either about facts or about individual values, the linguistic (that is, social) basis of perceptions is usually unrecognized. (Edelman, 1977, p. 25)

Weick (1985) calls attention to the important role of labeling in organizations:

> Labels carry their own implications for action, and that is why they are so successful in the management of ambiguity. Consider these labels: that is a cost (minimize it), that is a spoilage (reduce it) . . . that is a stupidity (exploit it) and so forth. In each of these instances a label consolidates bits and pieces of data, gives the meaning, suggests appropriate action, implies a diagnosis, and removes ambiguity. (p. 128)

Successful labeling is clearly one of the keys to organizational power (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick, 1985). Labels can also be seen as the most *unobtrusive* device: Who grows suspicious of a classification?

We now turn to some evidence from the studies mentioned.

*Change labels: decentralization.* An empirical study of the Submunicipal Committee reform in Swedish municipalities (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1987) demonstrated the use of such artifacts in organizational change. Employed as control means, they helped to introduce desired changes and to fight resistance to change.

The most important label was that of "decentralization." Calling something "decentralization" in the 1980s is as positive as labeling something "centralization" had been in the 1960s. Decentralization is, by definition, good. However, as demonstrated in many studies (see, e.g., Di Tomaso, 1985), almost identical organizational or political changes may be called "centralization" or "decentralization," depending on the intentions of label-producers and on a current fashion. Even more positivistic studies, such as the classic decentralization studies by Blau (1970) also note the relativity of the concepts of centralization and decentralization and try to solve the issue in

a way that can be best summarized with the help of one of the platitudes used in the Submunicipal Committee reform: "Every decentralization requires some centralization."

Weick (1985) tells us that labels help to control by removing ambiguity. Labels differ, however, in the degree of their concreteness, and therefore in the degree of ambiguity they are able to remove. Compare "this is a cost" and "that is a decentralization." We know that the former is bad and the latter good, but the detail of diagnosis and the specificity of indicated action differ. Costs must be reduced, but decentralization can be only a desired state of affairs, and there are many ways of achieving it.

Broad, abstract labels of that kind are very useful as a control device, because they permit a flexible redefinition of steps to be taken. "This is a cost" defines the value ("costs are bad") and limits the scope of action (there are not many ways of cost reduction). "This is a decentralization" defines the value ("decentralizations are good") but opens a great vista of possibilities (one may even have to centralize in order to decentralize). In fact, the decentralization label gave meaning to the entire range of changes proposed in municipal reform: It created a context of positive expectations, thereby blocking potential protests.

*Imported labels: leadership.* With the international spread of U.S. management theories and "buzzwords," a continuous flow of labels into Swedish organizational worlds can be observed.

An interesting example is the transfer of the "leadership" label from the writings of "gurus" such as Peters and Waterman, Maccoby, and Bennis into the Swedish public sector. For many years, organization researchers were interested in "management" as a process of organizing the stream of people, things, and money toward a desired product, leaving "leadership"—a process of influencing people and allowing them to be influenced—to small group, psychological research, or, alternatively, to the political sciences. In the early 1980s interest in

"leadership" and in charismatic managers accompanied a fascination for "corporate culture." The label came to Sweden from the United States, starting in the private sector. It then infiltrated the public sector, where for many years leadership was a "forbidden word." The leadership label successfully infiltrated Swedish organizations because public dissatisfaction with the public sector there paralleled praise of the private sector as a model to be followed (Czarniawska, 1985). Hence, the private sector adopted the U.S. vogue, and the public sector humbly followed.

As the label penetrated even the iron gates of the public sector, it was no wonder that "leadership" turned out to be one of the important aims of "decentralization" reform. Yet if we attempt to look beyond the labels and consider actual phenomena, it becomes clear that "decentralization" and "leadership" do not go hand in hand, to say the least. If citizens have to have more say, the last thing they need are charismatic leaders—be they politicians (who should be intent on reflecting needs and not dictating them) or administrators (who should be efficient servants, and not the rulers of souls). Logically speaking, decentralization should decrease the amount of, and the need for, leadership. However, the proponents of "leadership" claim that it takes place through activation of followers, and that therefore leadership and decentralization should support each other. As labels do not operate via activation of logic, any relationship between the two is, of course, possible.

*Label as stigma.* Labels are not neutral "sorting" devices (Osgood, 1963; Turner, 1971). Once learned, they influence subsequent action. The most negative form of labeling is stigmatizing. For example, a group of people in positions threatened by the Submunicipal Committee reform was labeled "heretics," in spite of the fact that some of them were very eager to contribute to the change. However, the label stuck; they were expected to resist the change and their efforts to the contrary were in vain. The labels had defined their place in the social space.

A stigma defines fronts and limits: It excludes those who possess it from others who do not. Of course stigmatizing, like all labeling, can work in any direction—it can also counter attempts at control. Groups opposing the Submunicipal Committee reform reversed its major label by dubbing it "central-money-saving-operation."

**METAPHORS**

> The process of metaphorical conception is a basic mode of symbolism, central to the way in which humans forge their experience and knowledge of the world in which they live. (Morgan, 1980, p. 610)

To understand better the role and function of metaphors, it is useful to compare them with *factual judgments.* Factual judgment has its base outside language, whereas metaphor, which is a *semiotic judgment*, constitutes connection inside language (Eco, 1979). The main difference between the two is

> the amount of time spent in order to produce knowledge. Factual judgements as such die as soon as they are transformed into semiotic judgements. . . . Successful factual judgements are remembered as such only when they become famous ("the famous discovery of Copernicus"). On the other hand, metaphors . . . tend to resist acquisition. If they are inventive (and thus original), they cannot be easily accepted; the system tends not to absorb them. Thus they produce, prior to knowledge, something which, psychologically speaking, we could call "excitation.". . . When faced with metaphor, we sense that it is turning into a vehicle of knowledge, and intuitively . . . we grasp its legitimacy. (Eco, 1979, pp. 86-87)

Metaphor is an operation by which "aspects of one object are 'carried over' or transferred to another object, so that the second object is spoken of as if it were the first" (Hawkes, 1972, p. 1). Following Eco, metaphors can be:

- *acceptable,* when they evoke a desired association but fail to achieve aesthetical power and therefore fail to influence.

"Organizations as political systems" (Morgan, 1980) could be an example of such a metaphor;
- *rewarding*, when they create a new association. "Organizations as garbage can" (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972) is a good example of such a metaphor;
- *defaulting* (deceiving), when it is very hard to discover the association, and when found, it is not really illuminating. "Organizations as seesaws" (Hedberg et al., 1976) can—in our opinion—be an example of such a metaphor. Another case of a defaulting metaphor consists, as Eco (1979) puts it, in "matching something that our common knowledge has long since matched, and without exciting results" (p. 4). "Organizations as hierarchies" is such a case.

Metaphors have remained, until recently, a subject matter of literary criticism, semiotics, and hermeneutics. As organization researchers became interested in such fields, metaphors have moved to a central place in organizational studies. Manning (1979) has proposed to use "metaphors of the field" as a tool for comparative analysis of different organizations. Morgan (1980) has suggested that major metaphors of organizational theory itself could be traced back to such field metaphors. Already the enthusiasm this has created led to serious warnings against a metaphor overdose (Pinder & Bourgeois, 1982). Here we will focus on metaphors of the field, that is, those used by the actors in order to better understand their role in control processes. Such metaphors are much more than decorative figures of speech (see also Brown, 1977; Morgan, 1983); they are symbolic expressions of instrumental schemes, thus joining expressive and practical orders, desire and work, into one.

Metaphors serve a very important function in the spreading of new ideologies (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988). They convey new meanings by fitting them into imagination-stimulating messages. Their role thus consists of reducing the uncertainty produced by an encounter with the new: They refer to something that is better known than the object of the metaphor. They can be seen as shortcuts in explanation, as they try to evoke a single image that encompasses the entire range of meanings of the object. And their "decorative"

characteristics answer to a need for color and a touch of life in otherwise somber organizational reality. This can explain the startling fact that, as Thompson puts it after Percy (1961) a metaphor "is often most effective when it is most 'wrong'" (Thompson, 1980, p. 233). It is the metaphor's expressive, and not reflective, power that is the most important (Geertz, 1964).

Again we draw on some examples from studies on organizational control.

*Metaphors and change.* In the Submunicipal Committee reform, metaphors served to facilitate the understanding of change and to increase its attractiveness: By evoking colorful associations, metaphors educated and motivated organizational members. Here are some examples:

> Coordinators must be "primus inter pares."
>
> Central administrative offices are becoming an elephants' graveyard.
>
> It's a way of breathing new life into dead party organizations.
>
> We got this rich flora of experiments.
>
> The integration of the social welfare administration has produced a fantastic mastodon.

A good example for a well-coined metaphor is "rich flora of experiments." It evokes an image of something manifold, colorful, spontaneous, but also unregimented, hard to walk across; indeed, different respondents have emphasized different aspects of the metaphor.

On the other hand, "To blow life into dead organizations" is not far from the platitude "We have made a living democracy," which illustrates characteristic shift from metaphors into labels or platitudes. Effective metaphors, after being used for a long time, lose their expressive power. The first person who said "your eyes are like stars" was the author of one of the most successful metaphors ever, but by now it has become one of the oldest platitudes. Obviously, the difference between metaphors and platitudes is a matter of context and historical perspective: One of our own favorite metaphors, "Living under the cold

starlight of scarcity," turned out to be a platitude for our Swedish colleagues, who had the opportunity to learn it by rote long before we came to Sweden.

Finally, a metaphor that failed. "Primus inter pares" ("the first among equals") was meant to picture the role of the Submunicipal Committee's coordinator (as the newly created managerial position was called) in the so-called "collective leader team." However, the attempt has failed miserably, as everybody within teams felt threatened. The "coordinators" did not know whether they had any managerial prerogatives or not; the "coordinated" felt that a traditional hierarchy was introduced under a democratic disguise. It is not only intellectual or esthetic qualities but also social sensitivity that characterize successful metaphor.

*Metaphors and managerial philosophies.* Metaphors were prominent in another case, that of a Swedish company facing economic decline during the oil crisis. The newly appointed president of SF AB (as we called it) had proposed a new ideology and, both in the propagating phase and in the phase of internalization, put linguistic artifacts to an efficient use. Some came from the outside, for example, from consultants, but the president of SF AB was also successfully coining metaphors himself. Here is how he explains "gardening" as a metaphor for people development:

> There are two basic philosophies about development. One is the so-called engineering philosophy and the other is gardener philosophy. If you have an engineering philosophy about development you look upon people as pieces of metal that you put into a lathe and then into a grinding machine and then into a lathing machine and then you put them into the oven to harden the surface and then perhaps you grind them again and finally you have a piece that fits perfectly into the organization chart. The only mistake with that particular philosophy is that it is poorly wrought. There is no way that I can develop you and there is no way you can develop me. You develop yourself if you want to do it and if you feel inclined to do it. If the environment is such that you feel that you want to develop yourself. Therefore, it is much better to take a gardener attitude. You

> look upon the company as a garden with plants all around. Then it is the responsibility of the gardener to walk through this garden and water the plants, give them a little extra soil, perhaps fertilizer sometimes, and perhaps one plant is sitting there in the shade and needs more sun, so you pick it up and move it into the sun and if someone in the sun doesn't want this should be put in the shade and perhaps somebody in sandy soil should be moved over and put into some other kind of soil and sometimes you have to remove some undesirable plants that hinder the growth of the others. And if you look upon the company this way, then things start to happen.

The metaphor has been effective, to the extent that it was frequently used by other company managers interviewed. They took pride in describing their organization as a "hot-house" where all the "plants" are provided with the best conditions possible for development.

*Imported metaphors.* The task of metaphorical embellishment of managerial talk in SF AB was imparted to consultants. The company had bought, lock, stock and barrel, a set of metaphors from a U.S. management consulting group. As a result, the executives interviewed had taken to talk about "experience curves," "milking cash cow," "watching out for wildcats," "predicting stars," and establishing "normal pictures."

The successful import of metaphors was possible in the first place because SF AB had become, at the managerial level at least, a bilingual company. Translated into Swedish, most of these metaphors would not sound that attractive, or would inadvertently change meaning. For instance, Lennart Arvedson, the Managing Director of Tom Peters Group Europe, is still launching the "excellence" concept in English ("Ledarskap" No. 11, 1986). In Swedish, "excellence" would become "masterskap," a more limited notion with a distinct sports flavor to it. Sports is an important reference structure for Swedish organizational metaphors. However, "excellence" means not only something more spiritual and idealistic than craft-like "mastery," it also means "as in American business," and this is important.

*Metaphors and values.* The last example points to the relation between metaphors and underlying world views or value systems. In his seminal book, *Images of Organization* (1986), Gareth Morgan takes on the poetic challenge presented to social sciences by Richard H. Brown (1977) and analyzes various metaphors used by researchers to describe and analyze organizations. This idea opens another avenue to thought, not sufficiently explored. If researchers see organizations through the glasses of various metaphors, don't organizational members do the same?

Take some of the eight metaphors in organizational theory that Morgan identifies. It should be of great importance for organizational life whether a managing director perceives "his" or "her" organization as a "machine" or as a "flux." And it is likely that various group members within an organization hold different metaphors while thinking and talking about their workplace. One may argue that some organizations "objectively" resemble a "machine" or a "psychic prison" to a larger degree than other organizations. But the metaphors chosen by organization members also reflect certain basic values that are difficult to otherwise detect. Thus Morgan's metaphors for organizations may be linked to beliefs in basic values or driving forces within organizations (see Figure 1).

By studying metaphors of the field we can learn much about what we always wanted to know and never knew how to ask—that is, the values and beliefs held by organizational members. Although our data do not allow for such an analysis, tracing metaphors of the field may also enable us to better understand the way organizational theories are turned into metaphorical resources for organizational control, as it were. In talking to managers, we encounter the products of our forerunners transformed into tools and used for purposes not necessarily foreseen by them. And, as Morgan shows, we in turn use what we find to forge new theories of organization (see also, with respect to sociological theories of technology, Joerges, in press, a).

| METAPHOR | DOMINANT VALUE/DRIVING FORCE |
|---|---|
| machine | rationality |
| organism | natural selection |
| brain | learning |
| culture | search for meaning |
| political system | power (distribution of) |
| psychic prison | unconscious |
| flux | change |
| instrument of domination | power (concentration of) |

**Figure 1: Metaphors of Organization and Supportive Values/Forces**

The two most prominent metaphors emerging from the studies are the "rich flora of experiments" and the "gardening" images. Without making too much of it, the combination of rationalist and organic metaphor in the first instance (public sector), and of (agri) cultural and organic metaphor in the second (private corporation) is suggestive. Both metaphors serve to safeguard a precarious balance between values that are not easily reconciled. The "rich flora of experiments" and related metaphors in SMC reform reflect newly asserted values of "alternative political institutions in a society committed to popular sovereignty" (March & Olsen, 1986, p. 341) in the face of "politics in terms of aggregating exogenous, prior preferences of citizens" as represented by the centralized welfare state. But of course, as befits the welfare state ideal, it is flora by design. Similarly, the "gardening/gardener" and "hothouse" metaphors, propagated by a very determined CEO, reflect the spirit of rejuvenation and refertilization to be kindled in a

company emerging from decline. While not ruling out images of autonomous growth and personal development, they at the same time vividly convey the basic hierarchical and engineered character of the enterprise.

We assume, then, that metaphors, in order to be efficient at organizational control, must encode possible solutions to conflict between basic value orientations of those engaging in organizational talk.

*Metaphor and taboo.* As some labels may be sharpened into stigmata, some metaphors may be invested with almost sacred status by representing values so fundamental that questioning them would approach blasphemy. Organizations *are* brains: They "learn" and "make decisions," and even if they are sometimes "irrational," this must not be anarchically understood as challenging their essentially rational nature. Correspondingly, some metaphors are blasphemies and as such are taboo: It takes courage or great invulnerability (counter-control?) to call one's own organization a "concentration camp" (as one of the more famous fellows of the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies once did). By the same token, the expression of ultimate values must rely on metaphor, both as a code for that which is valued most highly and for that which is opposed most strongly on organizational life.

## PLATITUDES

> In politics, as in religion, whatever is ceremonial or banal strengthens reassuring beliefs regardless of their validity and discourages skeptical inquiry about disturbing issues. (Edelman, 1977, p. 3)

In literary criticism, platitudes are considered a defect, an error in the art of creative writing or speaking. We propose to treat them as verbal rituals, that is utterances whose meaning is entirely symbolic. They do not refer to concrete things or events except in the sense of subsuming them under taken-for-granted everyday generalizations. Their unquestioned, repeti-

tive character makes this obvious and easy to understand. This characterization suggest a likeness between platitudes and rituals, both being linkages between the specific present and the accumulated past.

The most significant function of platitudes is to facilitate interaction by reducing uncertainty (see also Hendricks, 1987). In other words, in an interaction filled with tension due to a high level of uncertainty, a platitude serves to reduce this tension by pointing out a certain common ground and certain values that are shared by all the participants. Platitudes seem to be the opposite of metaphor, but actually they fulfill a similar function in a different way: While metaphors reduce uncertainty by relating the unknown to a better known, platitudes relate it to the very well known. The relation between them is continuous, and their precise place on the continuum depends on the experience of the receiver: What for some is a platitude is for others a daring metaphor. Platitudes can also ease tensions produced by far-fetched metaphors and shocking ideologies. Their transparency invites easy consensus, and their familiarity relieves social frictions.

Unlike labels, which can be seen as "frozen metaphors" (Brown, 1977), platitudes are dead metaphors. As the expression jumped between two different realms, it lost its colorfulness and excitement. Instead of being unexpected and even dangerous, it has become safe and routine: the usual. That is why platitudes are forbidden in the world of art. However, it is only reasonable to expect many platitudes in a situation of organizational change, which by definition is filled with uncertainty.

*Platitudes and change.* In the Submunicipal Committee reform, a whole set of platitudes seemed indeed to be inherent to the reform. Here is a partial list:

Democracy is not given once and for all.

Democracy has to take its time.

Every decentralization requires a corresponding centralization (and the reverse).

One has to increase the opportunities for people to come nearer to the decisions (and the reverse).

We ought to go out to people with this activity.

There are to be short lines between execution and decision.

Decision makers must anchor themselves better in reality.

Central units must retain overall responsibility.

Some respondents laughed after having mouthed these sentences, in order to distance themselves from the platitude as a rhetorical tool. However, they nonetheless used these platitudes, we believe, for precisely the reason already mentioned: to relate to a certain shared value, observation, or way of thinking, and to indicate to which "school of thought" they belonged. And their laughter did not sound ironic.

*Irony.* The organizational use of platitudes may be better understood in contrast with what platitudes most patently are not: irony. Irony is taking something from its conventional context and placing it in an opposite one, be it by choice of expression (rhetorical irony) or tone of voice (irony of manner). Through such a negation, it is easier to reveal the most important attributes of the matter in question (Brown, 1977). Irony operates through shock, tension, and uneasiness. It forces attention and deepened reflection by negating what is seemingly accepted. And that is why irony tends to be at the service of organizational countercontrol. It does not serve well to promote consensus and organizational change.

A deadly enemy to platitude, irony threatens all linguistic artifacts. It may unravel labeling schemes and puncture metaphors. For this very reason, irony is a double-edged sword that is too difficult to handle to be of much use in the maintenance of organizational control.

## LINGUISTIC ARTIFACTS AS TOOLS FOR CONTROL

> The ability to categorize the world verbally and to respond to those categories gives human beings a powerful but unstable instrument of control. (Sederberg, 1984, p. 10)

We started out with the assumption that labels, metaphors, and platitudes are important tools of power-forging. Those who have or pursue power in organizations use them to "construct" reality for others, convince others that things are what they think they are, are like they think they are like, and are normal when they think they are normal. The right, and even the obligation, to define shared meaning is part of the cultural definitions of authority itself. "Whether authoritative definitions have any impact on actual response is, of course, another matter," notes Sederberg (1984, p. 67).

And this is the matter that interests us here. Linguistic artifacts enable leadership to manage meaning by explaining, coloring, and familiarizing, as opposed to the traditional control methods of commanding, fighting, and punishing. In Sederberg's terms, they build the shared meaning by consensus and not by coercion. In that sense they can be seen as more stable instruments of control, as, once agreed upon, they do not provoke opposition and rebellion. However, unlike traditional control tools and like other artifacts, they change their role depending on the user. Opponents use them for counter-control: doubting labels, pointing out nonmetaphorical elements in metaphors, and ridiculing platitudes is a successful strategy; creating new and opposing labels and metaphors is even more so. This is facilitated by the precarious nature of control metaphors as devices for integrating potentially conflicting values.

## THE MECHANISM OF CONTROL

How can we conceive, conceptually, of control processes mediated by artifacts? In view of the split mentioned at the outset between concerns with production machinery in industrial sociology and symbolic communication in recent organization theory, an integrated approach to both material and linguistic artifacts would seem promising. There are not many leads to follow in social science theorizing, however (see

Joerges, in press, b). One is Elaine Scarry's theory of the interior structure of the artifact. Scarry proposes a general mechanism of control-by-artifacts processes by conceptualizing artifacts as sites of projection and sites of reciprocation of action:

> A perception about human sentience is, through labor, projected into the free-standing artifacts (chair, coat, poem, telescope, medical vaccine) and in turn the artifact refers back to human sentience, either directly extending its powers and acuity (poem, telescope) or indirectly extending its power and acuity by eliminating its aversiveness (chair, vaccine). (Scarry, 1985, p. 307)

Artifacts can be said to control the action of their users by the projection of their designers. Production of labels and for organizational use presupposes such use: One does not call something a "decentralization" for the sole pleasure of mouthing words, but with the assumption that others will act upon it. "The human act of projection assumes the artifact's consequent act of reciprocation," says Scarry (p. 307).

Scarry also notes that in many situations it is advantageous to hide the first part of the set—projection—to make reciprocation seem self-standing and autonomous (p. 314). If the "decentralization" label is to control action, it is better if decentralization is perceived as "objectively existing" and not as a label coined by Mr. X in the department of social welfare.

One can also expect that organizations are filled to the brim with various labels, metaphors, and platitudes. It would be an exaggeration to expect that they are all equally potent and useful for control purposes. What makes for a successful use of a linguistic artifact? Among many labels, metaphors, and platitudes, which are best? Those that are best adapted to a situation at hand and those that are most useful for control purposes, is an obvious answer. This is, however, a *post factum* reasoning and it borders on tautology: The most successful linguistic artifacts are those that succeeded.

But not all of them are successful. Many fail: Labels are rejected, metaphors misunderstood, platitudes produce irritation rather than facilitation. That is why Sederberg (1984) calls them "a powerful but unstable" instrument of control. Some attempts at creating shared meaning fail miserably, some succeed beyond any expectations. Why?

The studies referred to cannot answer this question, and it is not easy to think of research designs that would help in doing so. However, we suggest that a theoretical analogy might shed some light on the process. Robert P. Abelson claims that "beliefs are like possessions," and conducts his analysis with the use of this metaphor (Abelson, 1986). The analogy rests on the similarity between beliefs and artifacts of interest here. Organizational members adopt offered labels, metaphors, and platitudes for their own use.

Following Abelson, one may conclude that linguistic artifacts, like beliefs, are objects that provide value to their owners. For those in control, this value is mainly instrumental: They can induce others to think and act as desired. For the "second-hand" owners, their value is partly expressive—the artifacts show who they are in terms of belonging, experience, and feeling; however, they are also instrumental in helping them to understand the world and orient their actions, whether confirming or opposing.

## THE MANUFACTURE OF CONTROL TOOLS

Conventionally, the production system is seen as the realm of material artifacts and the control system as the realm of linguistic artifacts. They are even studied, as we suggested at the outset, by two separate groups of students.

However, the two systems can be also seen as two production systems. One produces whatever is the organizational output; the other produces control. Linguistic artifacts are the "machines" of the control system. Throughout our discussion of "control talk," we have mentioned certain generative mech-

anisms by which labels, metaphors, and platitudes produced control.

A final question concerns the origins of linguistic artifacts. If they are tools, they must themselves be produced. Who produces these instruments of control and how are they produced? Our studies do not allow for a complete answer to this. But evidence exists that the linguistic constructions we have discussed are themselves designed, manufactured, turned into commodities, marketed, and sold as tools for the production of control in organizations.

Barry A. Turner (1971) still remains very much alone in his attempt at a joint analysis of the material and the symbolic as the same organizational reality. He demonstrated how symbols support production of material outcomes. We have tried to show how symbols sustain the production of control. In continuation, one would have to analyze how symbols themselves are produced.

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