Making School Development Credible

Text, Context, Irony

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Abstract

The article argues for the importance of an open, reflexive-methodological approach when switching between studying text, context and researcher activity. Close linguistic analysis can benefit from being linked with the researcher's contextualisation of his empirical material as well as with more distanced readings. The more specific starting point for this article is that school development, like other similar terms such as school improvement and the like, makes use of linguistic building blocks with which whole narratives about today's and tomorrow's schools can be constructed. The subject of the study is a short text issued by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen). Government language changes according to the authorities' role in society and their own definitions of their functions, and an important aspect here is the legitimacy of the authorities' texts. By means of various kinds of close linguistic analysis, the above-mentioned text is studied with regard to choice of categories, hierarchies of modalisation and the rhetorical effects of different types of formulations in a broader political-social landscape. The article concludes with a reflective discussion on the relationship between government language and irony as a stylistic device – a device that is based on the results of the close empirical analysis.[1]

Sammanfattning

Artikeln argumenterar för vikten av en öppet reflexiv metodologisk hållning när det gäller att pendla mellan text, context och forskaraktivitet. Den nära språkliga analysen kan med fördel förenas med forskarens kontextualisering av sitt empiriska material - och dessutom med mera distanserade narrativa läsarter. Den mera konkreta utgångspunkten för denna artikel är att skolutveckling, liksom kringliggande ord som skolförbättring och liknande, innebär språkliga byggstenar med vilka hela berättelser om dagens och morgondagens skola kan konstrueras. Som studieobjekt används en kort myndighetstext. Myndighetsspråk växlar med myndigheters samhällsroll och självdefinierade uppgifter - och en viktig sak är det legitimitetsarbete som myndighetstext innebär. Med hjälp av olika typer av språknära analys bearbetas en text från Skolinspektionen; från val av kategorier och modaliseringar, till olika formuleringars retoriska effekter i ett vidare samhällspolitiskt landskap. Artikeln avslutas med en reflexiv diskussion om relationen mellan myndighetsspråk och ironi som stilgrepp - ett stilgrepp som bygger på den nära empiriska analysens resultat.

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> Poetic licence is every storyteller´s prerogative – the acknowledged
> right to twist the facts for effect. (Gabriels 2000, s 31)

Introduction

The term school development is a signal that leads to a number of narratives
about the state of society and its place in history. Nowadays the term is almost
self-explanatory and can be used as a rhetorical device for various types of socie-
tal narrative with an underlying political-moral purpose. Expressed in other
words, it may be said that school development is included in a number of narra-
tives of a political nature. There are also a number of variant terms in Swedish
for 'school development' that use improvement and effectivisation words of
various kinds with varying focus: cost efficiency, goal fulfilment and quality
improvement (Gorard 2010). In Sweden we can see that a whole bunch of gov-
ernment agency and development organisations have been built up round these
terms, and not least the organisation (and reorganisation) of these authorities
changes frequently. For a long period of time the Swedish Board of Education
(Skolverket) has included in its instructions different types of development oper-
ations; for a while there was the Agency for School Development (Myndigheten
for skolutveckling) and at the time of writing there is much discussion about the
importance of school inspections, international comparisons of exam results, the
achievement of equality goals in school, the local authorities' placement of pu-
pils in special schools and so on and so forth. In order to deal with these tasks,
the activities of the School Inspectorate have been expanded, but there has also
been increased investment in research and extensive evaluation processes. Ad-
mittedly, in this article, School development does not refer only to a specific set
of practices or goals laid down by the government authorities themselves but
also to a more general concept of development such as we see in many places in
society. However, the Schools Inspectorate itself often defines its tasks as devel-
opment projects, which further highlights the relevance of our specific text ex-
tract for studying constructions of school development in its various discursive
forms.

On a more collective and analytical level, it is possible to see a number of
standard narratives (in Sweden and elsewhere) in which School development is
used as a rhetorical resource such as: School development as the realisation of
the multicultural society, School development to achieve the sustainable society,
School development working for political equality, School development to effec-
tivise the public sector, School development as a way to reach goals, School
development to adapt to future needs, School development as organisational
change, School development for changing relations at workplaces – and a great
many more. So much for the broad picture. At a lower text level we can see
important details in these narratives, and it is mainly, though not exclusively, on
these details that this article focuses.

Thus the aim of this article is concrete and empirical as well as methodolog-
ical. Every academic reading and every research text is formulated as a relation-
ship between the empiric aspects of the study, the researcher's contextualisation
of these empiric aspects and the more generally held analytical starting point of

the study. Expressed more concretely, this study is placed at the meeting point of a T junction which looks like this: the empirical part is short and taken from the Schools Inspectorate's home page; the methodological approach is inspired by the sequential focus of conversation analysis. The question here is what can be done about texts as sequential rhetoric, above all in terms of creating trustworthiness. This type of inquisitiveness into rhetorical details is seldom given much attention in social-scientific text analysis (Potter 1996). This is the first type of methodology that focuses its analysis on the text's explicit expressions – in short, its empiry.

As for the societal contextualisation, the starting point is that the text is within the framework of rhetorical work carried out by a government authority and that the specific authority, the Schools Inspectorate, is a part of a broader tradition and a more comprehensive context in which school politics and school development is within their area of responsibility. This implies that the organisation linguistically constructs both itself and the political goals that are to be achieved, in the present case, 'School development'. The other methodical approach seeks a broader narrative generality by contextualising the material as part of discursive government practice in the field of the school.

On the third road is the researcher activity that is often called a reading (Säfström & Östman 1999). Here we are interested in how critical readings can be used to give texts a new and different appearance than the reading that is based on realistic starting points concerning linguistic correspondence and understanding hermeneutics. However, it is also fruitful for the social sciences to make closer use of more literature-like approaches in their reading. Here, for example, styles like tragedy, comedy and irony, which imply researcher activity in the form of more distance reading (Bennet 2005; Czarniawska 2004). To sum up, the analysis in this reflective manner (Ashmore 1989) will be brought into play by these three different positions, and the aim is to try to work in a methodological meeting point where the advantages of the various positions can be united in the form of empirical craft, societal contextualisation and researcher activity (Wetherell 1998).

Theoretical starting points and contextualisations

The amount of text that authorities produce today gives a slight feeling of superiority if, for example, one is a researcher interested in language usage. There are two possible explanations of this: on the one hand, the amount of text is quite simply overwhelming, on the other hand the authorities' language seldom communicates anything controversial since it always presents good social goals. In addition, the authorities' language as a genre is, of course, expected to be more or less free from design. However, this does not mean, of course, that such texts are unimportant or uninteresting as a phenomenon. On the contrary, I believe that we all too seldom study the linguistic practices of authorities – at least if we mean linguistic analysis of a more inquisitive nature.

There is, of course, a vast amount of text analysis in the social sciences. It is probably one of the very most common subjects of study, especially if we are talking about research which has, in some form or other, a political-analytical

purpose. But there is good reason to take textual research a little deeper, down to the word and sentence level, not least in the field of the school. In my opinion, a good deal of the social research on texts produced by authorities and politics consists of translations of small discrepancies rather than analysis. That is why there is every reason for the social sciences to take the concrete uses of language more seriously, without necessarily transforming themselves into the science of linguistics.

In general scientific support of this approach, reference may be made to a large amount of discourse analysis. Discussions in this field have been very lively in respect of moving between large and small discourses and large and small narratives, or between actors' utterances and researcher contextualisation. These discussions have taken place across a broad research landscape: in conversation analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis of a post-structuralist nature and so on (Bamberg 2006; Shenhav 2005; Spector-Mersel 2010; Wetherell 1998; Börjesson & Palmblad 2008; Deacon 2003). Here, the basic questions have, naturally enough, been brought to the fore by the linguistic and narrative twists and turns we have seen within the humanities, at least since the Foucault effect and "the death of the author" entered onto the stage, but also in a more empirically concrete way around the question of whose context should be studied: the actors', the discourse's or the researcher's? There is good reason here to say that this swinging between the manifest discourse and the context constructed by the researcher is an effective way of working and not a problem. Furthermore, this choice can hardly be avoided; instead, we should welcome the productive aspects of switching positions and the continuously rhetorical effects of language (Billig 1993). The rhetorical material is always combined with some kind of analytical aim, with a particular purpose in mind. In this respect, it is therefore not a weakness but a conscious methodology to make such swings between the discourse of the material and that of the researcher.

Thus, contextualisations made by the researcher form a necessary part of the work process – in everything from the introductory design to recurrent placings of the material under study. There are also, however, great benefits to be gained by extending the actor concept to include things; in this case, to see what words and text do – at least potentially and tentatively. The study of language material can, of course, be carried out in several different ways. What seems most relevant to this article is the type of discourse analysis that takes its tools from traditional rhetorical analysis – but within the framework of social constructionism, which emphasises the productive element in every utterance, in every piece of language material (Potter 1996; Gergen & Thatchenkerys 2004).

Language offers an abundance of alternative ways of describing reality, which are seen here as a resource for convincing people and creating trustworthiness. But if this is to happen, every speaker needs to keep to the repertoire of acceptable utterances within the relevant context – to "what is tellable", which in turn is dependent on what are socially and culturally acceptable codes (Labow 2006). What is tellable is in this perspective a proposal for an analysis based on studies of speech rules, but also on a transparency with regard to the many possibilities language has to produce alternative and surprising versions. There is no version free reality, so the project in the social sciences is precisely to study

versions (Law 2004). In connection with this discussion, it is important to see how utterances, whether oral or written, can never be free from modality; every utterance can be formed with several different degrees of certainty- from 'X could exist in certain situations' to 'the fact is that X' (Wahl 2006). This opens up possibilities for an analysis of the relation between what is said and how the party that makes the claim constructs itself. To sum up on the basis of the above, we might say that utterances of various kinds not only produce their own reality but also exclude other versions (Billig 1989; Roberts & Good 1993).

Many people in the school world take the directives of authorities very seriously indeed. They follow the various statements in school politics, they debate new and old curricula, they study changes in authorities, they interpret the aims and underlying values of directives. Where in public life do people talk more about the democratic mission if not in schools? Where do people devote greater efforts to discussing and problematising ways and goals to achieve a better future society? It seems to be important either to follow or to protest against the continuous, well-meaning flow of decrees in school politics. This is possibly something separate from everyday school work; perhaps it is an interest that mostly comes to the surface when school politics are to be discussed. However it may be, we can at any rate agree that the school authorities themselves put a good deal of work into formulating and presenting themselves, their tasks, their mandate and their future goals.

The large amounts of public texts issued by authorities in our days are in themselves a political sign. Authorities have in part been given a new role in the political system. It is no longer the case that authorities sit anonymously in the background; no longer are authorities expected to be the long arm of and the executor of policies. Today, to a high degree, it is the case that authorities should devote themselves to developing ideas and activities and, perhaps what is most interesting, to building opinion (SOU 2008:118). With the combination of a executing, developing and opinion-building function, we get not only authorities with several symbolic faces but also a large number of policy documents, draft ideas, education programs, brochures, conference documentation, descriptions of the good examples, characteristics of the not so good examples, pictures, figures and endless texts.

The great efforts that authorities make to publish pictures of their work can also be connected with the broader social tendency that authorities (and organisations in general) need to work continuously with their legitimacy. This work needs to be carried out both because authorities rest on the basis of a representative democracy and because it is known that authorities can be closed down or reorganised at short notice. There is always a need for every organisation to prove its legitimacy, but perhaps especially for public services since they are expected to represent society, you and me. Authorities should be impartial, they should represent the political expressed will of the general public and they are also expected to defend the rights of individual citizens. Here, however, lies the question of how organisations work for their own good rather than for their publicly formulated function (Eriksson-Zetterquist 2009). In addition, we must take into account the large-scale reorganisation trend in our time whereby organisation has become continual reorganisation and, in many cases, winding up, which

is also very evident with regard to the Swedish Board of Education, the Agency for School Development and the Schools Inspectorate.

An important observation from research on organisations in recent years has dealt with the importance of studying organisations' need for legitimacy; not least through the emphasis they place on rational processes (Powell & DiMaggio 1991; Brunsson 2006). This is a question of how management and whole organisations need legitimacy via the concept of rationality. This rationality, however, is difficult to carry out and follow since management needs to relate the whole time to several different kinds of logic and wishes. Legitimacy work is an important matter, perhaps all the more important in recent years but in any event central for organisations in the public political eye. The manifest surface of rationality, built on arguments and symbols, gives legitimacy – when it is successful. These rational arguments include not least the analysis of the outside world, which gives the activities and decisions an aura of security and relevance. Evaluators, auditors and planners here are roles and functions for this work, with the (potential) effect that the activities are seen to be both rational and legitimate (Power 1999). Other markers, in the context of school authorities, are, of course, words like mission, penetrating analysis and research-based guidelines.

These, then, are my proposals for contextualisations of authorites' texts, but to move on and place the analysis on a closer level involves a large number of promises for the social sciences. Here, social linguistics, rhetorical analysis and theory of organisations – to mention but a few academic genres – can cross-fertilise each other, and we can thus distance ourselves somewhat from all the social-science work that mostly focuses on summarising and translating into its own words what could just as well be read in the empirical material. That is why there is a possibility here to actually do analysis. In this article I shall now go very close to the level of the evidence but also zoom out from time to time to more general areas of social-science interest.

Presentation of five success factors. Text and a beginning of analysis

Just before summer 2010, the newly established authority the Swedish Schools Inspectorate sent an invitation for an information day to those affected and interested. It wanted to describe how the authority works, what assignments it has – and hold the dialogue with the community that so many authorities make an effort to maintain today. During this Schools Inspectorate Day, notes were taken that were later placed on the Inspectorate's home page. The following documentation, among others, can be found there:

> The Director of the Schools Inspectorate, Ann-Marie Begler, opened the conference by describing the Inspectorate's work aimed at giving all students a good education in a secure environment. Among other points, she listed five important success factors that the Inspectorate places great weight on:

• The importance of having high expectations of the children The Inspectorate's goal is that all students shall have at least a pass mark in all subjects.

• The importance of following up results in order to be able to assess the quality of the work and to be able to give the right support to teachers and students.

• The pedagogical leadership of principals. If a principal is to be able to give good support to staff, it is important that they are in a good position to develop their own pedagogical leadership.

• Teachers. Achieving a good education requires competent teachers with the right training for their work in order for them to be able to achieve good results in school.

• Work on foundation values in schools. Children must feel secure if they are to do well in school.

These five success factors, among others, are important for the Inspectorate's qualitative inspections. A qualitative inspection means that the authority carries out a deep study of some of the activities in a number of selected schools, for example an individual subject or a problem area for these schools. The starting point for these inspections is both regulations and research.

This short text, including the list of success factors, is what I will now examine and give a few suggestions as to how to analyse it. But before that, let me present how I look upon the question of generality and the possibilities for generalisation. The empirical text for this article is only just over one page long. My analysis will begin within the framework of this page of text but also continue far beyond it. On the basis of a considerably broader reading of authorities' texts, it will make a number of more general statements and analyses. This does not mean that the short empirical text is ubiquitous or that it is a summary of the Inspectorate's text production. Every text is strictly speaking quite unique in its composition of words, sentences, metaphors and the like. But there are arguments and points of this type in many different places. The Inspectorate's points and sentences turn up in other authorities' texts, in research (for example, the point about 'successful schools'), in political debates, on municipalities' home pages and so on and so forth. The same basic argument, the same rhetorical devices, the same choice of categories and the same type of causal statements are to be found far outside this particular text. It is here that the narrative analysis is needed, covering everything from an analysis of the choice of words, the exclusion of other words – and on to a genre analysis and questions concerning the text's dramaturgy. It is time to get to down to work.

The introduction
Let me begin with the short introduction that precedes the list of points. The fact that the Director of the Schools Inspectorate opens the conference is a kind of

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signal that says something about the importance the Inspectorate attaches to the conference, specifically the task of communicating with the outside world. But what the Inspectorate actually thinks and considers is not my concern here; instead, it is to analyse what sort of reality is presented by text of this kind - in line with the perspective on organisational activity that I use as my starting point above. That is why I choose to begin with the phrase "opened the conference by describing the Inspectorate's work" The authority that "describes" its work is informal and eager to communicate its message to its listeners. In authorities' language in general this is relatively striking: they do not inform, even less inform about their already made decisions – at least not without a reference to information about their "political assignment". In this way things can be more authoritative, but then it is mainly the political power that stands for what is already decided. By this means the authority attains the otherwise so difficult position of trustworthiness by being both efficient and free from responsibility.

The first point

The first point is of a moral kind, this call to have high expectations of the children. "The importance of having high expectations of the children. The Inspectorate's goal is that all students shall have at least a pass mark in all subjects." Since it is in relation to the children that one should have such expectations – while this "one" is not specified - it might be presumed that this is a general requirement of the adult world. "great weight" is placed on it. The metaphor of weight in the moral call makes it very difficult to escape from such a position; what the Inspectorate places great weight on cannot just be ignored. Here we might bring in the major debate on whether there were too low expectations of students in the "woolly-minded school". High demands of the weak students, is in the interest of the weak students' – this has for a time been a successful rhetorical phrase. After all, it is a delicate position in a general egalitarian discourse (like 'democratic rights') to claim that only a little hope can be expected of weaker students. It is better, then, to have hopes of everyone, and thereby achieve a good position as a speaker. But this is only a minor detail in the explicit categorisation here – in the shift between children and students. Thus having high expectations of children may be a good rhetorical position – self-categorisation for the person who has just this means that one believes more in children than others do. Expressions like 'the competent child' is a variant of this kind. It gives credibility to believe more of children than the implied opposite party, those who underestimate children's abilities. Believing that children have competence and ability is then the opposite of keeping them down. At the same time there is a rhetorical risk to be dealt with, namely the position that says that one can have too high expectations of students – which can lead to truancy, a sense of insecurity or stress. This risk may, for example, be managed by emphasising that all students shall be able to have "at least a pass mark in all subjects." Talking about higher grades might have been more rhetorically risky. After that the category changes names: the children become students. It is not just children that get good marks, at least not the whole child. It is in their role, their character as students that marks come into the picture. We do not grade children – that

would be to go too far. Just as a child does not have a price, we do not have the right to grade the human child. The shift from 'children' to 'all students', on the other hand, gives us such a possibility, a right, perhaps even an obligation? That a public activity such as the school should be for 'all children' is self-evident in this rhetorical context. A child, however, cannot be generalised, a child is unique and has its own intrinsic value beyond school marks. The aspect that is spelt 'student', however, well, here it is not only possible but even compulsory for the representative of a government authority to protect everyone, protect them equally well – and improve the activities for the benefit of everyone.

The second point

In the second sentence of the first point, the Inspectorate also lives up to its own moral demand, which perhaps makes the call extra binding. The Inspectorate itself has a goal there: all students shall have at least a pass mark in all subjects. "The importance of following up results in order to be able to assess the quality of the work and to be able to give the right support to teachers and students." It may be thought that this is a wholly necessary connection to the Inspectorate's own decree. If the Inspectorate had directed its demand at other parties in the school but excluded itself, the point might not have worked quite so well rhetorically. Everybody's compulsory support for the high expectations of students is strengthened by this responsible self-categorisation on the part of the Inspectorate. Every utterance by the authority is an explicit or implicit self-categorisation. Here it is clear and written down in "the Inspectorate's goal…"; they are visible, they are clear and they have a message. When Point 1 moves on to Point 2, the actorship shifts; now it is not an explicit actor that is seen. "The importance of following up results" refers rather to schools in general, doesn't it? No actor is defined as being responsible for ensuring that this takes place; it is a general moral call to work for quality.

The second point also gives an interesting version of what quality is – and how it stands in relation to the students' marks. It is not the marks in themselves that they seem to be talking about but rather high quality in the activities in two parts: 1) the right support to teachers and students and 2) at least a pass mark for all students in all subjects. Quality becomes a sort of underlying factor, which is also the term that is used in the introduction ("success factors").

Quality in school activities, and presumably in all other organisations' presentations, is something there in the background – invisible, unattainable. If school development is to be discussed at all, there is a need for signs, expressions and indicators of this invisibility. Now there are of course an extremely large number of invisibilities in what we call society; school development is not less clear and distinct that a great deal else such as knowledge, culture – or discourse. The point here is not to put school development on a place apart but to see what signs are used to denote it. There is a strong card in the Inspectorate's points: a pass mark in all subjects. This probably has strong rhetorical power thanks to its compulsory character: no one can be against an aim of this kind, and furthermore this line can, to strengthen its case, point to figures for students' final school marks, statistics and standard deviations. Figures have had such a

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strong rhetorical power for a very long time (Johansson 1988; Ekström 1999). But there are so many more success factors, not least of a mentalist kind. To have high expectations is put forward as one of these factors; to follow up is a procedure factor, to give the right support is self-evident.

As for the moral calls, there is a great deal that could be said on this subject and I will return to it later. Here it can suffice to say that it is usual to have references to attitudes among the actors in the school world; in the end it is ambitions, the desire for quality improvement that is voiced. This does not prevent us from putting our hopes on the ability of research to seek out, survey, trace and reveal this metaphysical term called quality. But people's will and ambitions cannot be neglected in a political project that says it requires commitment and the right attitude. School development, as narrative, is wholly dependent on a mentality, a desire for school development.

Back to the five success factors. It is somewhat difficult to follow the significance and reference in the passage: "The importance of following up results…". I can imagine it refers to the activities, that is, the results in individual schools. Here the matter is turned upside down: now it is the marks that are to be the measure of quality. It is all causal in both directions: the quality of the activities is central to giving the right support to teachers and students – which in turn gives results in the form of good marks statistics. But at the same time it is the complete reverse: the results (i.e. the marks) come first and are what decides the conclusion when it comes to assessing the school's quality. Or is it rather the follow-up that should be read as the emphasised concept in this point? The importance of following up is a very widespread mantra in various organisations. The demand raised in the first point, of having high expectations of the children, is followed by the demand to follow up results.

A more distanced reading of the second point reveals that there is a moral requirement here. Someone is required to follow up their results, which is not done self-evidently, it is implied, in all situations. The Inspectorate points out, reminds and urges people to carry out follow-ups; otherwise it is impossible to judge quality, and in that case, it is impossible to give the right support to teachers and students.

Here one can imagine that a number of alternative formulations have been eliminated, versions that would not work so well in relation to the Inspectorate's idealistic tone and form of presentation in our time. An elimination is evident in that no actor is indicated. If there had been an actor, for instance schools or teachers or those responsible for quality in the municipalities, the demand for following up would have been seen more clearly. Now the formulation is without an agent, which gives the Inspectorate a less demanding image. It only speaks of what it puts great weight on, and actually does not indicate anyone as being responsible. That would possibly have been more consistent with a classical authority's tone.

The third point

The third point, however, introduces an actor who is often mentioned in school development connections: the principal. But it is not the principal in general that

is the category, nor the people in Sweden who are employed as principals, it is the principal (as a function) and specifically and its pedagogical leadership that is the category: "The principal's pedagogical leadership. If a principal is to be able to give good support to staff, it is important that they are in a good position to develop their own pedagogical leadership." In general this says that principals need to begin with themselves in order to be able to give staff good support. But there is also a step before that: it is important that "principals are in a good position to develop their own pedagogical leadership". Thus first the conditions need to be good (not clear what this is and who should be responsible for it), and then principals can develop their own pedagogical leadership. If there had been more space, the Inspectorate would certainly have been able to give examples of what being in a good position means, but what is interesting in this type of inquisitive text analysis is that the eye moves across the lines and we understand what it says there.

But what does the formulation do, then? One possible interpretation is that it gives a sort of moral relief, an alleviation concerning the demands that can be made of principals. No one can require that a principal should develop anything at all unless the right conditions exist. But it can all be considerably more demanding; once a principal can be considered to be in a good position, there is no room for excuses for the development of pedagogical leadership not having taken place. In the right conditions, there is no excuse for poor results, but who provides the right conditions? Here we are left without any agent or allocation of responsibility.

And then come the staff in, a category that, in the text, needs good support. What had functioned worse as a characteristic of this category? To 'give staff meaning in their professional life' is probably out of the question – as is 'to give staff support'. The more or less impossible alternatives can be numerous; the point here is to point out how the staff is a category that is both independent and vulnerable. The word support gives us a clear metaphor: support is all that is required, no one wants a situation in which the staff need to be reported on – or if it comes to that, be taught good manners and disciplined. This is a balancing act between autonomy and needs for the staff category.

The second point presented the explicit categories of teachers and students who would get the right support from a hidden actor, from a follow-up process. The third point presents an actor in the form of the principal, but now the teachers and students are no longer the categories in question. The importance of following up results seems to lie in some kind of unity, but when it comes to the principal, it is the employer that is responsible for staff. This is interesting since the category relationship of principal – staff leads up to the importance of developing pedagogical leadership. Thus it is a mix of the relationship of employer – employee and the relations between professional parties.

In the first three points, the categories are placed in different relations to each other. Not least, expectations of a specific nature are brought in. For example, the students' results are not something that can be considered to be achieved until the other parties have done their bit. Thus the students are the rightful recipients of both the actors' work and the result of the processes. Teachers in their turn are entitled to support – and principals need to be in a good position to de-

velop their own pedagogical leadership. But in fact there is no actor category beforehand. It is not the case that, for example, the authority or politics gives the principal good conditions. It is important that the principal has good conditions, but no one is explicitly responsible for giving them to the principal. It may be thought that this has been avoided to allow the responsibility to both begin and end in the school itself. On the other hand, we often see in other places that politics must provide conditions for societal development, even though it is everyday actors that are to carry out the requirements. 'We want to create conditions for' is a common self-definition in politics in our time. This gives a balanced power and responsibility system consisting of both demands and exemption from demands. Policies that give actors good conditions are active and responsible, at the same time as actors outside politics cannot be blamed if societal development nevertheless does not take place. But, as already mentioned, the responsibility and activity of the Inspectorate are not evident in this particular text. Perhaps the Schools Inspectorate thought: 'It is not we that should do this. We want to see independent activities. We want to support schools in their development. Then, of course, we have inspection as our tool as well, but in the first place we still have confidence in the school's own strength and professionalism.' A whole political universe lies in those words: first incentive, then inspection – and in the worst case sanctions. But first things first, so to say. That is the universe we are living in (Rose 1999).

The fourth point

Point four has to an even greater extent than the previous ones a tone of the obvious. Here, more than previously, we find utterances with strong modality. Thus, regarding teachers: "Achieving a good education requires competent teachers with the right training for their work." The logic runs between the words 'good', 'competent', 'right' and 'their'. Who is to have access to the good education (the students) is left out; instead, the focus is on the teacher category. But as the sentence stands, there are several types of teacher. It would have been enough to say: "A good education demands competent teachers", but a further step is introduced that says that teachers perhaps do not always have the right training for their work. How is this to be understood? One suggestion is that competence is not universal for all teachers; the text produces a number of context-dependent teacher functions, according to the context, one presumes. Another suggestion is that this alludes to the discussion about having unqualified teachers in schools who nonetheless both teach and exert authority by setting grades. Or is this ascribing more meanings and stronger logic to the material than is reasonable? Perhaps it is more than so, perhaps authorities' language is often filled with adverbials (especially adverbs of degree), and that these are an important resource for convincing people of the importance of 'development'.

It is self-evident that we must take care of unaccompanied refugee children in a better way, or be clearer in our information to preschool parents, or more systematic in coordinating social resources. There is not anything that can in fact be questioned and hardly even be surpassed when we are to show what we want to do and what we stand for. Of course it is good when it is better, it is clearer

when it is more transparent and there is more order when it is systematic. Adverbs of degree and prepositional phrases are of extreme importance for school development, at least as it is produced by means of authority rhetoric.

Rather better than worse – and rather much better than only a little better… It is not only politics that provides us with such self-evident ideas; there are also plenty of proposals of this kind made by authorities and social research. A basic explanation why this is so is, of course, that language use looks like this both here and there; even in the text you are reading now you will find a large number of adverbs of degree and general intensifiers. But the aim of this article is to examine how authorities' language functions rhetorically and perhaps assure us that we are on the road to a social change, and not just any old change but to a more developed state, an improved state. Adverbs of degree are central here for such rhetorical aspirations.

The fifth point

And now the fifth and final point, which connects children's sense of security with good school results: "Work on foundation values in schools. Children must feel secure if they are to do well in school." Here too, of course, there is a movement, a direction; it is the school's work on foundation values that comes first, thus having a causal character in relation to a sense of security, as the rhetoric is built up. Thus work on foundation values in schools is a guarantee for (a reference to) emotional security. But isn't it the students who do well in school? Evidently not, at least not if the main point in the sentence is 'security'. It is children who feel or do not feel it. In the best case, the child feels secure – and the student does well.

But the words 'do well' can probably be seen in two different ways: on the one hand a high ambition, a strong adverb of degree, not just to be satisfied with coping with school work. After all, we shouldn't be too hard on the children. The requirement to do well can be made of categories like adults, university students, researchers and financial advisers. But children – isn't it mostly good efforts that can be required of them? Looked at it that way, the words are rather an alleviation of the demand to do well. In this connection, we may well ask ourselves whether it is a mere coincidence that the soft point comes last when the Inspectorate speaks.

The concluding part

Let us return now to the main text from the Inspectorate. After the five points comes a summary of a few different things. Now a more authoritative tone is used in the reminder about "the Schools Inspectorate's qualitative inspections". Let us look at it again:

> These five success factors, among others, are important for the Schools Inspectorate's qualitative inspections. A qualitative inspection means that the authority carries out a deep study of some of the activities in a number of selected schools, for example an individual

subject or a limited problem area for these schools. The starting point
for these inspections is both regulations and research.

The reader is told that the five points should be taken very seriously if he or
she as the school representative wants to receive the Inspectorate's stamp of
quality. However, the five points are not totally comprehensive. There are evi-
dently several other possible and at this stage invisible factors that schools are
expected to work on – marked in the text as 'among others'. This detail also does
something for the self-presentation. The Schools Inspectorate gives its audience
a broad summary of its activities in the form of five points, but it also reveals the
fact that it does other things too. It would have been a little too little if a large
organisation did not have more extensive work than could be summarised under
just five points.

The fact that the Inspectorate does not only carry out flying inspections is
emphasised in several places. First we see "deeper studies", then "of a part of
our work" and in "selected schools" and in "an individual subject or a limited
problem area" Now the definitions and operalisations become more distinct than
before. This is perhaps where the vagueness in the ideas mentioned in the five
points: "high expectations", "good support", "the right support", "do well" and
so on is dealt with.

The distinct and limited aspect of the work is emphasised finally in the sen-
tence: "The starting point for these inspections is both regulations and research."
What body can be more democratically legitimate that the one that rests on
rules? And what actor other than research can better than any others lay claim to
ontological certainty? At this meeting point between political legitimacy and
scientific certainty stands an important body: The Schools Inspectorate. Here are
gathered its guarantors - the authority is guided by political ideals - and it is
normative, it aims at social improvement and it is systematic and connected to
research. All these self-presentations are important for the Inspectorate's work
to ensure its trustworthiness at the same time as, at least potentially, a certain
doubt may arise in the reader's mind. This is one side of the question. But on the
other hand, we can also think that there is a rhetorical strength in this multi-
positioned approach in which the language of research reinforces language use
that signals political intentions – and vice versa.

The ironic conditions for authorities' language

The level of language details makes it possible to firmly establish and nuance
analyses made by social-science researchers. Details, I have presumed, are often
underexploited in text analysis in various disciplines such a sociology, political
science or economics. The use of, for example, sequences, choice of words and
modalities provides great possibilities for going on to areas of more interest to
the social sciences such as studying the self-presentations of organisations and
the work to build up trustworthiness that lies behind them. An important aspect
of my work has been to ask: What is at stake? Another question was: For what
purpose are various arguments and phrases used? A third one will now be: What

do these utterances do, in relation to more general narrative genres, and: How might one formulate alternative narratives along this road? (Brandser 2005)

Here I would like to propose a narrative contextualisation of the Schools Inspectorate's five points, and similar material, in relation to the style of irony – based on the language details provided by the Inspectorate and through my contextual reading and placing of them. Let me begin by saying something general about this concept. There are several meanings of irony and moreover these meanings have changed over time (Hutcheon 1995). One common definition is this short one: to say one thing but mean the opposite. This meaning of irony is not applicable here since I have not looked for intentions in the authors of the Inspectorate's text. In everyday contexts, irony is often connected to humour by means of sarcasm and its bad intentions. But this, too, is not applicable, nor is it my point. It is not the point of contact, if any, between irony and sarcasm that I am interested in here, nor irony as a form of humour. The meaning I intend to use is more of the tragic kind – as in the phrase 'the irony of fate' or 'the irony of history'. The contradictoriness of irony is the central point here, and in particular the gap between aims and results. When something is carried out with great trouble and repeated efforts – and still the aims are not fulfilled – we get an ironic situation in the bitter outcome. In language usage aimed at bringing about changes, one can imagine that the more energetic the efforts are, the more ironic the effect when the attempts fail dismally.

The language I have studied above reveals a number of such ironic contradictions. But one thing has to be emphasised: my main point is not to reveal the actual contradictions and be content with that. The ironic contradiction is possibly a problem for the author with rationalistic ambitions, but here it is a question of seeing what rhetorical devices were available and how they were put to use for various purposes.

In this short and closely studied text – and in a number of other such texts that I have examined - actors are presented as necessary for the actor-free process: school development. The desire for development work has to exist at the same time as there have to be both conditions and processes that almost automatically lead to school development. All school development is dependent on distinguishing between actors and categories, which have different tasks and areas of responsibility – at the same time as there are in fact no persons finally responsible. School development must take place as a result of human efforts – and yet quite spontaneously. Actors are needed, but they are immediately marginalised by processes, good conditions and go-ahead mentalities.

Thus school development should take place due to autonomous parties, who need both inspiration and inspection. School development is wholly necessary – obligatory and indispensable in relation to the problems that exist and future threats. At the same time, we see instead an appeal to the actors in schools to take part in this process – and also add their weight to it. We find ourselves in a situation reminiscent of the concept of "zombie categories", that is, concepts that live with a dead content (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). School development claims to exist, to have life and a content, but actually it does nothing itself to give its existence life. This should come instead from outside, from those who

develop schools; and furthermore without there being a key to the content that counts (Carlgren & Hörnqvist 1999).

Yet another ironic aspect is the ontology of school development. School development is school development is school development. The words claim to represent what school development is - it is 'real', yet it does not allow itself to be captured. In order to manage this, a series of different formulations are produced that cannot be contradicted. We have seen expectations, goals, quality, leadership, competence, foundation values – and a good deal more. None of these is open to discussion as the agenda seems to be. If such matters are also to be and become good, better, higher and so on, we have identified the developing qualities in School development.

Very often we can see in material of this kind that the success factors are both the conditions and the outcome, both conditions for change and the actual goals of change. The success factors hardly remain unchanged, nor do they necessarily come before their effects. What we are looking at is an imitation of science in as far as there should be potent factors that lead to a certain outcome, an outcome that would not have occurred without these factors. Thus we can see a very intricate relationship between efficiency and specific goals, in the sense that there is a choice between doing things the right way and doing the right things (Sköldberg 2005). This logical property, that success factors are simultaneously conditions and outcome, is yet another ironic tension when the Inspectorate has to adapt to the discursive conditions that exist in today's school debate.

The success of the abundant talk about success factors, for example those listed by the Inspectorate, is perhaps due to the fact that it is possible to move between political, moral and scientific contexts. Success factors are something like a bunch of standard narratives that are present in everyday conversation, in expert language and in school research. They function both as folklore-like common sense and as expert language. The fact that these standard narratives are shared by so many contexts gives them their strength. In the same way, texts from government authorities and research claim knowledge of cause and effect, of what affects what. But the causal line can in many cases be turned round so the goals become the conditions, which fundamentally violates the basic narrative forms that we surround ourselves with – where the play has causes and the outcome occurs as a result of the process being made understandable (Gabriels 2004; Corvellec 2007).

At first sight, nostalgia and school development seem to be opposites. What is nostalgic needs a reference that lies back in time, whereas development aims at something not yet attained, only imagined. But it is probably also possible to find a nostalgic future landscape in authorities' language like the above; in a landscape where 'the good', 'the right' and other adverbs of degree are used, at least some of the most important components of nostalgia have been raised: longing with an undertone of complaint. The bittersweet in our time, at least in school politics, seems to be placed in a future that people cannot wait to realize (Hutcheon 2005).

Conclusion

Earlier I distanced myself from seeing irony here as being connected with humour, but of course it all also has a comic aspect when speakers make such extreme efforts. The comic effect occurs when speaking and writing fail to convince, for example when several contradictory positions are adopted and dealt with by the Inspectorate. When we do not believe, the gap opens up, we smile at the speaker's pretentious attempt to get us to see what is disparate and divided as uniform, as something held together consistently and logically. After all, irony always has an edge (Hutcheon 1995). But this point does not occur until one has decided to make an ironic reading. Thus the ironic becomes a product of the receiver's choice and activity. Hence irony always has a political aspect. A reading based on a more sympathetic approach would not have the same consequences. In an understanding reading, the reader looks for the same story as the author, while in an ironic reading there is another story, one that lies outside the other one. That is what I have looked for, and so irony occurred in the tragic-comic effect of the gap between the presentation of school development and its ability to convince.

But what about the inquisitive empirical analysis? Can an ironic reading simply be made of any material at all – and be convincing? My argument has been built up on the importance of basing its reading empirically as well as emphasising all the research activity that is required to create an academic investigation of a problem, or if you like, a story. The analysis of the language details has been a part of what I called in the introduction a methodological T junction. Here lies the substance that met the researcher's contextualisations (the text as authorities' language) and the researcher's establishing of the meta-levels (irony etc). In a trivial sense, the empirical admittedly comes first, but at the moment of research the three are simultaneous if one adopts a reflective perspective. The ironic reading has difficulty in being convincing if it does not present its subject of empirical study in its original form; after all, it is here that the efforts of academic craftsmanship to achieve methodological transparency lie. The discursive conditions that apply to school authorities have been the empirical contribution to this article in terms of creating trustworthiness, (multi-)positioning, ontological contradictions and so on, conditions that it was possible to reveal thanks to reflective distancing.

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Notes