



A critical reflection of current trends in discourse analytical research on leadership across disciplines. A call for a more engaging dialogue

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Abstract:	This paper takes the frequently lamented state of current leadership research in business and organisational sciences as a starting point and argues for a more open and engaging dialogue with leadership researchers in applied linguistics and pragmatics. Focusing on current debates around terminological issues and methodological questions that are particularly prominent in critical leadership studies, we show that research in applied linguistics and pragmatics has the potential to make important contributions by providing the analytical tools and processes to support critical leadership researchers in their quest to challenge hegemonic notions of leadership by moving beyond simplistic and often problematic leader-follower dichotomies and by providing empirical evidence to capture leadership in situ thereby feeding into current theorisations of leadership.

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5 **across disciplines. A call for a more engaging dialogue**
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11 **Abstract**
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14 This paper takes the frequently lamented state of current leadership research in business and
15 organisational sciences as a starting point and argues for a more open and engaging dialogue
16 with leadership researchers in applied linguistics and pragmatics. Focusing on current debates
17 around terminological issues and methodological questions that are particularly prominent in
18 critical leadership studies, we show that research in applied linguistics and pragmatics has the
19 potential to make important contributions by providing the analytical tools and processes to
20 support critical leadership researchers in their quest to challenge hegemonic notions of
21 leadership by moving beyond simplistic and often problematic leader-follower dichotomies
22 and by providing empirical evidence to capture leadership in situ thereby feeding into current
23 theorisations of leadership.
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39 **Keywords:** leadership discourse, applied linguistics, pragmatics, critical leadership, leader-
40 follower dichotomies, challenging hegemonic notions of leadership
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47 **Introduction**
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50 In a relatively recent editorial in this journal, Dennis Tourish (2015: 137) expressed his
51 concern over the current state of leadership research and lamented that, “[r]esearchers seem
52 content to ask smaller and smaller questions about fewer and fewer issues of genuine
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3 significance, producing statements of the blindingly obvious, the completely irrelevant or the
4 palpably absurd.” Remarks like this show that those involved in leadership research are
5 desperately looking for new approaches, new ideas, new questions, as well as new answers to
6 old questions. This is particularly true in critical leadership studies, where researchers aim to
7 “challenge hegemonic perspectives [...] that tend both to underestimate the complexity of
8 leadership dynamics and to take for granted that leaders are the people in charge who make
9 decisions, and that followers are those who merely carry out orders from ‘above’” (Collinson,
10 2011: 181).

21 We believe that many of the conceptual and methodological issues currently being
22 grappled with in this strand of leadership research – including debates around terminologies
23 (e.g. Learmonth & Morrell, 2017; Collinson, 2017) and calls for more detailed explorations
24 of “the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 53) –
25 would benefit from a more systematic and open engagement with leadership research
26 currently conducted within the fields of applied linguistics and pragmatics. Looking beyond
27 disciplinary boundaries and venturing into largely ignored areas of inquiry has much to offer
28 to critical leadership studies, and, thus, fresh air may be brought into ongoing debates. In this
29 paper, we aim to outline some of the benefits and concrete areas of potential cross-
30 fertilisation between these, at the moment, rather separate areas of inquiries. Our particular
31 focus will be one specific area that has been repeatedly identified for its potential to bring
32 much needed fresh air to current leadership research, and where this cross-fertilisation
33 promises to be particularly fruitful, namely *discourse analytical approaches to leadership*.

34 **Discourse analytical approaches to leadership**

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3 Following the “linguistic turn” in social sciences (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Whittle et al.,
4 2015), over the past decade there has been a growing interest in the topic of leadership from a
5 discourse analytical perspective. In particular, since Fairhurst’s (2007) seminal work on
6 discursive leadership, research adopting a discourse analytical approach to leadership has
7 gained momentum – both within business and organisational studies (e.g. Crevani et al.,
8 2010; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010), as well as in applied linguistics and pragmatics (e.g.
9 Baxter, 2010; Holmes, 2007; Schnurr, 2009a, b; Clifton, 2012), and other disciplines.
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18 Acknowledging the central role of discourse for leadership, discursive leadership is
19 interested in understanding how leadership is *done* in and through discourse. Research in this
20 tradition mainly conducts qualitative case studies (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Whittle et al.,
21 2015; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013), and draws on some of the tools and methods developed
22 by discourse analytic approaches (such as Conversation Analysis (e.g. Clifton, 2006;
23 Svennevig, 2008; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013) and Interactional Sociolinguistics (e.g.
24 Schnurr, 2009b; Vine et al., 2008)). This research largely focuses on analysing the specific
25 discursive processes through which leadership is accomplished at the micro-level of
26 interaction – with the aim of gaining “a better understanding of the everyday practices of talk
27 that constitute leadership and a deeper knowledge of how leaders use language to craft
28 ‘reality’, construct meaning and contribute to sense-making” (Clifton, 2006: 203; see also
29 Whittle et al., 2015; Svenningson and Larsson, 2006). Hence, discursive leadership, in contrast
30 to much other research on leadership (which often falls under the umbrella of leadership
31 psychology (see also Chen, 2008)), does not attempt “to capture the experience of leadership
32 by forming and statistically analysing a host of cognitive, affective, and conative variables
33 and their casual connections” (Fairhurst, 2007: 15). Instead, discursive leadership research
34 focuses on *lived* rather than *reported* experience – thus often taking a constructivist approach
35 (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2012).
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3 In summarising the current state-of-the-art of discursive leadership research in
4 business and organisational studies, Larsson (2016: 174) identifies three broad strands of
5 inquiry: “How a designated leader enacts his or her role; how identities relevant to the
6 leadership process are constructed in interaction; and what influence and organizing
7 processes exist in interaction.” Research in applied linguistics and pragmatics focuses on
8 similar topics, albeit with a particular interest in identifying and describing the specific
9 discursive practices through which leadership is accomplished on the micro-level of an
10 interaction, and how the various processes to do with influencing and organising are enacted
11 throughout an interaction. Studies within the latter field of inquiry have, for example,
12 analysed how leadership is enacted in and through getting things done and assigning tasks to
13 others (e.g. Schnurr and Mak, 2011; Svennevig, 2008; Darics, 2017; Skovolt, 2015), solving
14 disagreements and conflict (e.g. Walker and Aritz, 2014; Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Holmes
15 and Marra, 2004; Saito, 2011), building consensus (Wodak et al., 2011), managing meetings
16 (e.g. Holmes, 2000; Clifton, 2012; Walker and Aritz, 2014) and acting as chair (e.g. Ford,
17 2008), decision-making (e.g. Marra et al., 2006), as well as sense-making (Clifton, 2006),
18 gate-keeping (van de Mierop and Schnurr, 2014), mentoring (Holmes, 2005), and creating a
19 positive working atmosphere in a team (e.g. Schnurr, 2009b; Darics, 2017).

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22 Discursive leadership research in both business and organisational studies, as well as
23 applied linguistics and pragmatics, is characterised by a strong focus on empirical data –
24 often in the form of audio- and/or video-recordings of interactions. Research conducted in
25 these disciplines also shares an interest in understanding how leadership is actually *done*, and
26 – in contrast to much of the earlier mainstream leadership research – rejects attempts to
27 establish “grand theories of leadership” (Clifton, 2006; Alvesson, 1996). However, in spite of
28 these shared interests and considerable overlaps, there is currently very little engagement
29 between scholars in these disciplines. On the contrary, there are only a very few attempts by

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3 those working within the (conceptual and methodological) constraints of one discipline to
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5 critically engage with the work done in the other (see also Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014;
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7 Crevani et al., 2010). This paper aims to address this dilemma and calls for a more engaging,
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9 open, and systematic exchange of ideas and practices between these disciplines. We argue
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11 that such an undertaking is particularly valuable for critical leadership studies as it speaks
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13 directly to their aim “to denaturalize leadership by showing it to be the outcome of an
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15 ongoing process of social construction and negotiation” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 43). In
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17 what follows, we spell out what concrete contributions research in applied linguistics and
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19 pragmatics can make to critical leadership studies by i) contributing to recent debates around
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21 leadership terminologies, and ii) providing alternative methodological approaches which may
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23 help address the current lack of empirical evidence needed to support and underpin
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25 theoretical assumptions and claims. We discuss each of these points in turn.
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32 **Recent debates around leadership terminologies**

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35 Although leadership has always been a hotly debated topic (Bass, 1981), the discussions
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37 around what is (not) leadership and which terminologies best capture the closely related
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39 issues of power and agency have recently gained momentum (e.g. Kelly, 2008, 2014;
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41 Learmonth & Morrell, 2017; Collinson, 2017), and are central to critical leadership studies
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43 which call for a “re-think[ing of] these dynamics in much more detail and in much more
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45 critical and dialectical ways” (Collinson, 2017: 279). In a recent paper in this journal,
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47 Learmonth and Morrell (2017: 262, 265) lament a generally “unreflexive use of [the terms]
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49 leader and follower” which largely impedes on or even prevents a genuinely “radical critical
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51 analysis” of the power dynamics and agency relationships in today’s organisations. In a
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53 response to this, Collinson (2017: 279) emphasises the importance of problematising these
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3 categories “in ways that render transparent the possible tensions, conflicts, ambiguities,
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5 contradictions as well as structural antagonisms in leader-follower dynamics, power relations
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7 and identities”.

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10 These debates make important contributions to current scholarship that criticises person-
11
12 centred views in favour of conceptualisations of leadership as co-produced and located in
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14 relations and interactions (e.g. Collinson, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Ospina & Sorenson, 2007).
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16 Rather than focusing on individuals, recent research increasingly distances itself from
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18 viewing leadership as intricately tied to specific persons or positions, and questions and
19
20 challenges notions of heroic leadership (e.g. Mehra et al., 2006; Thorpe et al., 2011). As a
21
22 consequence, these studies tend to focus on the processes of leadership and investigate how
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24 leadership (in the plural) is shared among the members of a particular group rather than how
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26 it might be reflected in the behaviours of an individual in a particular position (e.g. Gronn,
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28 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Crevani et al., 2010; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013; Choi &
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30 Schnurr, 2014; Clifton, 2017).
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35 Although the conceptual and theoretical debates around these issues seem to be currently
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37 more advanced in the business and organisational sciences literature (e.g. Crevani et al.,
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39 2010; Kort, 2008; Jones, 2014), we believe that research in applied linguistics and pragmatics
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41 can make important contributions to these discussions – in particular, by providing analytical
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43 tools and processes to identify and describe leadership practices in situ, thereby generating
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45 empirical evidence to feed into these debates. We have selected two examples from naturally
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47 occurring interactions (that were audio-recorded during meetings at different organisations)
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49 to illustrate some of the insights that can be generated through such an analysis. In line with
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51 research that challenges person-centred views of leadership, the first example illustrates *how*
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53 leadership is shared and co-produced among various participants, and it identifies and
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describes some of the (discursive) processes through which this is accomplished – thereby providing empirical support for currently largely theoretical debates.

Example 1 (from Clifton, 2012; simplified transcription conventions)

Context: During a monthly staff meeting at a European office of a British cultural organisation. The meeting was recorded on the eve of the US-led invasion in Iraq. Andy, the director, is chairing the meeting; Chris is the project's officer; Debbie is the information and communications manager, and Betty the assistant director. The 14 other participants do not contribute to the discussion below. Participants are discussing whether they should be screening a film called Gas Attack at the opening night of an upcoming film festival.

- 1 Chris: Er one thing I need t- to get a bit
 2 get everyone's opinion for the opening + gala night +
 3 one for the core film festival itself on the twenty-first of March
 4 er great Scottish film called *Gas Attack*
 5 which talks about chemical weapons in Iraq and
 6 asylum seeker dispersal programmes //in the UK\
 7 Debbie: /We tried it\\ last year but //didn't\
 8 Chris: /Hhh\\ so extremely hot topic
 9 (0.5)
 10 Chris: But
 11 Andy: //On the twenty-first?
 12 Betty: /I think\\ I think we may need to run that one past + //er\
 13 Chris: /We\\ might need t- to run it past //a few people first\
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3 14 Betty: /I think we'd better\ check + we need to make sure
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5 15 we're getting strong support from er from headquarters
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10 Right from the beginning of the excerpt, it is noteworthy that the leadership in this team is
11 distributed among team members, and that it is not necessarily the most senior person and
12 official chair (i.e. Andy) who takes on a leadership role. On the contrary, at this point in the
13 meeting it is Chris, the project's officer, who introduces a new topic and invites contributions
14 from the other team members on whether they should screen a potentially controversial
15 movie at the opening night of the upcoming gala. Although Chris is not the chair or officially
16 designated "leader" of the team, he takes on a leadership role here, and by explicitly asking
17 for "everyone's opinion" (line 2), he right from the start sets up the decision-making about
18 this particular issue as a shared activity. However, he does so in a way that enables him to
19 still maintain the ownership of the decision (as reflected, for example, in his choice of the
20 first person singular pronoun "I" (line 1)). So, at this point in the discussion, Chris is clearly
21 the one in charge: he brings up a new topic to be discussed at this point in the meeting (i.e.
22 whether to screen *Gas Attack*), he holds the floor for a comparatively long time (e.g. as
23 reflected in the number of words that he utters compared to the subsequent contributions),
24 and he invites others to express their opinions. If we view leadership as a sense-making
25 process (Pye, 2005; Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and as an exercise of
26 influence (Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), based on
27 this evidence we could say that Chris here claims a leadership role by positioning himself as
28 being responsible for this particular issue. This interpretation is further supported in the next
29 two lines where he overlaps with Betty (lines 7 and 8), thereby preventing her from finishing
30 her turn in speaking, in which she refers to another (presumably related) incident that
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3 happened in the previous year (note her use of the inclusive first person plural pronoun “we”
4 here, emphasising collective responsibility).
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8 Chris’ interruption is followed by a short silence (0.5 seconds in line 10), after which
9 he begins to start a new utterance (“But” in line 10), which gets interrupted by Andy who
10 asks a clarifying question about the date of the planned screening (line 11). Interestingly, this
11 question is not picked up by any of the participants – in spite of the fact that Andy is the most
12 senior person on the team – and instead Betty, who initially overlaps with Andy’s question,
13 gains the floor again (line 12) and actively contributes to the discussion by reminding people
14 that this kind of decision will need the approval of others, who at this point in the discussion
15 remain unspecified. Chris seems to agree with her point, as he picks it up and repeats it (still
16 without specifying who exactly they will have “to run it past” (line 13)). It could be argued
17 that, by picking up Betty’s initial suggestion, Chris agrees with, and also legitimises and
18 ratifies it. However, as we can see in the last line of the transcript, Betty, by overlapping with
19 Chris, repeats her suggestion and actually moves the discussion forward by providing further
20 information (“from headquarters” (line 15)), which the earlier contributions were lacking. In
21 this respect, Betty takes a very active role in the discussion, which extends beyond traditional
22 views of passive followers: not only does she make the most important contribution which
23 eventually moves the discussion forward, but she is also the one to outline future actions,
24 which are eventually implemented by the team. The same can be said about Chris, who
25 clearly takes on a leadership role in this discussion, as outlined above.
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47 These observations challenge static leader-follower dichotomies and, instead,
48 convincingly illustrate that, in this team, leadership is a distributed activity based on team
49 members’ expertise rather than hierarchical standing within the organisation. This relatively
50 short excerpt provides empirical evidence to illustrate some of the tensions that often arise
51 due to the theoretical dichotomisation of the terms “leader” and “follower” (Collinson, 2017;
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3 Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). The kind of analysis conducted above problematises such a
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5 dichotomisation by showing that different people take on different roles throughout a
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7 discussion, and that even “ordinary” team members – who are often referred to as “followers”
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9 (e.g. Bligh, 2011), “collaborators” (Rost, 1995 in Uhl-Bien, 2006) or “partners” (Uhl-Bien et
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11 al., 2000 in Uhl-Bien, 2006) in the business and organisational sciences literature – take an
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13 active role (as reflected throughout an interaction; for example, by introducing a new topic,
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15 interrupting (and taking over from) the official chair, taking and holding the floor, and using
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17 inclusive pronouns (“we”), etc). If we view leadership as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005;
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19 Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and as an exercise of influence
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21 (Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), this kind of analysis
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23 enables us to identify and trace how these activities are enacted on the micro-level throughout
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25 the interaction (even beyond the short excerpt shown above), and how, on a turn-by-turn
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27 basis, team members participate in the leadership processes – for instance by initiating new
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29 topics, making contributions to move the discussion forward, interrupting and overlapping
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31 with others to gain the floor, thereby actively deciding whose voice gets heard and whose
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33 contributions are reflected and incorporated into the final decision.
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38 The demonstrated “messiness” in which these diverse processes take place during an
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40 interaction provides empirical evidence of how complex leadership processes are, and how
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42 they are shared (although not necessarily equally!), and how as a consequence leadership is
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44 co-produced among interlocutors. Observations like these, thus provide important evidence to
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46 support claims that the theoretically constructed antagonisms in leader-follower dynamics are
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48 highly problematic (Collinson, 2017), as they often cannot be upheld in empirical
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50 investigations of actual practice. Such analyses, thereby, also contribute to attempts to
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52 “denaturalise leadership” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 46) as proposed by critical leadership
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54 studies, as they enable researchers to identify and describe the specific (discursive) processes
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3 through which leadership is continuously constructed and negotiated among interlocutors
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5 throughout an interaction, rather than conceptualising it as an a priori characteristic or a trait
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7 associated with a particular person or position. It is precisely in this respect that research in
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9 applied linguistics and pragmatics has much to offer to critical leadership studies.
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12 The next example further illustrates this, by demonstrating that the construction and
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14 negotiation of leadership is not always necessarily harmonious, and not every attempt at
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16 claiming a leadership role is successful. Rather, as recent theoretical contributions in critical
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18 leadership studies acknowledge, situated power relations are socially constructed, and are not
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20 always rationalised or reinforced, but may also sometimes be challenged and resisted (e.g.
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22 Collinson, 2014, 2017). Our analyses below illustrate how this can be captured analytically
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24 by drawing on some of the tools and processes regularly used in applied linguistics and
25
26 pragmatics research.
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33 Example 2 (from Schnurr, 2009b)

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36 *Context: During a meeting of the senior management team at an IT company in New Zealand*
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38 *with Neil, an external HR consultant. At this point in the meeting, Neil presents his vision for*
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40 *managing staff turnover in the company, which is one of the issues for which the company*
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42 *requires his consultation services. Neil's plans are based on a distinction between two types*
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44 *of staff turnover, as he outlines in the excerpt below. Shaun is a senior manager and Victor,*
45
46 *the CEO of the company.*
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50 1 Neil: So what I've got in here for top talent
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52 2 is retention of top talent
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54 3 and reduction and regrettable turnover
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3 4 i.e. redundancies
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5 Shaun: Regrettable turn- // [laughs]
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7 Victor: // [laughs]
8
9 Neil: /Regrettable turn I mean re- I mean re\
10
11 Victor: Do we regret this person leaving
12
13 No no //(get rid of them)
14
15 Shaun: // [laughs] // [laughs]
16
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18 Neil: // [laughs]
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20 Victor: It's not very sensitive is it
21
22 All: [laugh]
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28 If, like in the example above, we understand leadership as a sense-making process or an
29 exercise of influence, Neil's initial outline of his vision of how to tackle the issue of staff
30 turnover at the company (in lines 1–4) could be interpreted as claiming a leadership role. By
31 attempting to specify how he plans to solve the company's problem of high staff turnover,
32 Neil sets himself up as being in charge of this particular issue (note also his choice of first
33 person singular pronoun "I" in "what I've got in here" (line 1)), thus taking a central role in
34 the team's sense-making process and aiming to influence others to change their behaviour
35 according to his vision. However, he does not get very far, as his explanations are interrupted
36 by some of the members of the senior management team. In line 5 Shaun, one of the senior
37 managers in the company, makes fun of Neil's distinction between different types of staff
38 turnover. This criticism together with the subsequent laughter, which is joined by Victor, the
39 CEO and most senior member of the team, are potentially face-threatening and express Shaun
40 and Victor's criticism and rejection of Neil's suggestion. Interrupting and challenging Neil at
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3 this early stage in the discussion can also be seen as an expression of the senior management
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5 team's resistance towards his approach more generally.
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8 Although Neil attempts to regain the floor (and control over the discussion) by trying
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10 to justify himself (line 7) – which is characterised by two restarts and the pragmatic particle
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12 “I mean” – he gets further interrupted and ridiculed by Victor, who makes more fun of the
13
14 distinction proposed by Neil by mimicking him in the form of an exaggerated question and
15
16 answer sequence (lines 8 and 9). This is responded to with more laughter by Shaun, which
17
18 further expresses his agreement with Victor and resistance to Neil's attempts at leadership
19
20 (line 10). Although Neil eventually joins the laughter (line 11), which seems to indicate that
21
22 harmony among participants is re-established, Victor's subsequent critical comment “it's not
23
24 very sensitive is it” (line 12) once again signals his resistance towards Neil's plans, and
25
26 further challenges Neil's attempts at leadership. The question format and the utterance-final
27
28 tag question, in particular, render Victor's utterance very challenging, and make it clear that
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30 he is not convinced and does not subscribe to Neil's vision, nor is he going to follow it. He,
31
32 thus, challenges Neil's leadership claims, and actively resists (rather than follows) him.
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37 This short excerpt provides evidence for Collinson's (2017: 280) claim that “despite
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39 their subordination, followers can often find ways to resist”. Similar observations, which
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41 further problematise often taken-for-granted “structural antagonisms in leader-follower
42
43 dynamics” (Collins, 2017: 279), are made in a case study of Cheryl, a newly promoted team
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45 leader in a large multinational corporation in Hong Kong (Schnurr and Zayts, 2011). This
46
47 study shows that many of Cheryl's repeated claims for leadership, and her attempts to
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49 construct herself as the one in charge in the team's weekly meetings, are not supported but
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51 rather challenged by the other team members, who, in turn, claim a leadership role for
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53 themselves. This is reflected, for example, when they disagree with or ignore Cheryl's advice
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55 and suggestions, when they engage in discussions without her participation, and when they
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3 dominate the decision-making and meeting management (see also Chan et al., fc). Cases like
4 Cheryl and Neil show that “contestation is central to situated leader-follower dynamics”
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6 (Collinson, 2017: 280), and that “followers” often play a more active (and more critical) role
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8 in leadership than assumed in much of the business and organisational sciences research.
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12 Analyses of actual interactions, like the ones conducted here, enable researchers to
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14 trace the specific processes through which leadership claims are made and responded to (by
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16 ratifying or resisting them) throughout an interaction, thus providing important empirical
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18 evidence to support current theoretical debates around terminological issues. Such analyses
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20 enable researchers to actually show how leadership – as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005;
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22 Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and an exercise of influence (Fairhurst,
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24 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013) – is indeed a continuous
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26 process of (discursive) construction and negotiation (Fairhurst, 2008, 2009) that does not
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28 reside within individual persons or positions, but is rather co-produced among interlocutors.
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30 In the next section we start to explore some of the methodological implications of these
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32 claims by critically discussing how we should research leadership with the aim of gaining
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34 further insights into “the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership” (Alvesson &
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36 Spicer, 2014: 53) that critical leadership studies so urgently call for.
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44 **How can and should we research leadership?**

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47 As we have seen in the examples and discussions in the previous section, one area where
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49 research in applied linguistics and pragmatics is particularly strong is in its ability to identify,
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51 trace and eventually capture the specific processes through which leadership roles and
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53 identities are claimed and enacted, as well as responded to, by focusing on the moment-by-
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55 moment unravelling of an interaction. By drawing on specific discourse analytical tools and
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3 processes, insights into the *actual* practice(s) of leadership are gained – as opposed to the
4 recounted perceptions or post-experience evaluations often used by research conducted in
5 leadership psychology (see e.g. Fairhurst, 2007; Chen, 2008). But what are the
6 methodological implications of such an approach? How should we design our research
7 studies, what kinds of data should we aim to collect, and how should we process them in
8 order to generate findings that help us address some of the terminological issues outlined
9 above? We believe that the methodological approaches of current leadership research
10 conducted in applied linguistics and pragmatics have much to offer in this respect.

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21 One of the few research papers that outlines the specific processes through which
22 leadership discourse can (and should) be researched is Clifton (2006), who provides a
23 comprehensive overview of the various steps involved in such an emic approach to
24 leadership. Following standard practice in Conversation Analysis, the first step is the
25 collection of data, which “should not be guided by a priori research theories” (Clifton, 2006:
26 205). Step 2 is the transcription of the data to illustrate “the machinery of the talk” and to put
27 the data into analysable form (Clifton, 2006: 205), which is then followed by the analysis,
28 which should be data driven and focus on themes that emerge from the data (rather than those
29 that have been pre-selected by the researcher). This final step in a Conversation Analysis
30 approach should consider both the structure of the talk as well as its wider implications.

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43 Although these steps are very comprehensive, we would like to make a few additional
44 suggestions. Firstly, with regards to step 1, we believe it is important to be clear about the
45 object of study: is the study going to focus on a priori identified leaders (i.e. specific persons
46 or positions), thereby potentially upholding the problematic dichotomies of leaders and
47 followers discussed above; or is it going to explore the various processes of leadership
48 (however defined), thereby moving away from person-centred approaches? The answer to
49 this question has not only conceptual and analytical implications (as discussed above), but
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3 has also several methodological consequences, since this decision impacts on what
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5 interactional data should be collected – i.e. data involving a specific person or an entire team
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7 or communicative event. While a focus on individuals in leadership positions can be
8
9 operationalised relatively easily in terms of methodology (for example, by shadowing and
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11 audio/video-recording a designated individual over a specific period of time; as, for example,
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13 in Schnurr 2009b), the latter focus involves several methodological challenges, such as
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15 identifying ways of collecting data that capture the contributions of the various people who
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17 may potentially be involved in doing leadership.
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21 One concrete way of obtaining data to gain insights into the complexities of
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23 leadership by moving away from the dichotomies of leaders and followers is through
24
25 following a particular project (rather than individuals) and gathering data from different
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27 angles to try to capture the various stages and aspects of the project (as in Choi and Schnurr,
28
29 2014). This involves acknowledging that leadership takes place outside well-researched
30
31 business meetings, and that analysing a wider array of different kinds of interactional
32
33 contexts – such as one-to-one interactions, emails, whatsapp messages, blogs, telephone
34
35 conversations, etc. (e.g. Darics, 2017; Schnurr and Mak, 2011; Skovholt, 2015) – is crucial, if
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37 we want to gain genuinely new insights into the dynamics of leadership.
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41 A second point to add to Clifton's (2006) step-by-step approach refers to the third step
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43 regarding the analysis of the data. In analysing such potentially diverse datasets – including
44
45 spoken, written and multimodal data – and adopting a data-driven approach that allows
46
47 themes to emerge, guiding questions should not necessarily be: "Who is the leader?" and
48
49 "How are they doing leadership?"; but rather: "Where is leadership happening?", "Who is
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51 participating in these processes (and who is not)?", "How is this (discursively and usually
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53 collectively) accomplished?", and "What responses do the various claims at leadership
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55 generate?". Such an approach, exploring these questions and moving away from being
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3 person-centred, directly speaks to recent conceptualisations of leadership as co-produced and
4
5 located in relations and interactions (e.g. Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). In this way,
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7 researchers are able to identify and describe the discursive processes through which
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9 leadership is collectively (although not necessarily always in harmony) constructed and
10
11 negotiated among interlocutors. This approach is also be in line with critical leadership
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13 studies, which often “challenge the hegemonic view that leaders are the people in charge and
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15 followers are the people who are influenced” (Jackson and Parry, 2011: 95; Uhl-Bien, 2006;
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17 Alvesson, 1996). Example 3 illustrates this further.
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24 Example 3 (from Mak and Lee, 2015; modified transcriptions)¹
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27 *Context: Instant messaging exchange between two colleagues, Charles and Ricky, who work*
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29 *at an electronics holdings company in Hong Kong. Ricky has just returned from meeting with*
30
31 *a business partner at another company.*
32
33

- 34 1 Charles: how did he say?
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36 2 Ricky: how did he say?
37
38 3 he said
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40 4 “cif² is a must or we can’t make this business”
41
42 5 he ask “do you know cif?”
43
44 6 Charles: you should answer
45
46 7 “f????ck uuuu!!!”
47
48 8 Ricky: and I said
49
50 9 “it is impossible for us to sign cif with this quantity”
51
52
53

54
55 ¹ Spelling and grammar has been left as in the original.

56 ² ‘Cif’ is an abbreviation of “cost, insurance, freight”, which refers to an agreement, according to which the
57 seller has to arrange/pay for specific items as part of the trade deal.

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3 10 Charles: lets' talk to Samuel first
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5 11 Ricky: really fuck him off
6

7 12 Charles: Relax
8

9 13 you are not alone
10
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14 In approaching this excerpt for analysis with the questions outlined above, one could begin
15 by identifying some of the utterances in which leadership is taking place. If we view
16 leadership as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005; Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich &
17 Morgan, 1982) or as an exercise of influence (Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014;
18 Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), we could argue that leadership is happening at several places
19 during this relatively short excerpt. For example, throughout the interaction, both Charles and
20 Ricky are collaboratively trying to make sense of Ricky's recent encounter with a business
21 partner. Initially, Charles invites his colleague to report back on this recent business meeting
22 (line 1), before giving some concrete and relatively explicit – even if humorous – advice on
23 what Ricky should do (using the relatively direct formulation 'you should' (line 6)). By
24 trying to influence Ricky's future actions (i.e. by using the imperative formulations to "talk to
25 Samuel first" (line 10) and "relax" (line 12)), Charles at the same time claims a leadership
26 role for himself, which is legitimised by Ricky, as his cooperative and affirmative responses
27 indicate. Ricky provides the requested information (lines 2–5) and complies with Charles'
28 advice and suggestion for future action by giving more information (lines 8 and 9) and
29 repeating his frustration over the meeting (line 11).
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50 This analysis shows, once again, that leadership is a collaborative activity (e.g. as
51 reflected in Ricky and Charles' conjoint sense-making and negotiation of meaning), and
52 leadership roles do not reside in individuals or positions. They are, instead, claimed and
53 dynamically negotiated among interlocutors as an interaction unfolds. These observations
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3 provide further evidence in support of critical leadership studies' rejection of hegemonic
4 views of leaders and followers, and they also demonstrate that, if we really want to gain
5 insights into "the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership" (Alvesson & Spicer,
6 2014: 53) that critical leadership studies call for, we need to rethink our methodological
7 approach and move away from a focus on individual "leaders" (and "followers"). These
8 binary categories – especially when assigned a priori – are too static and limiting to describe
9 the diversity and perhaps messiness of leadership in situ. Clearly, leadership claims –
10 especially when understood as negotiating meaning and sense-making processes – can be
11 made by anyone – not just those in specific positions or with particular job titles – and they
12 can be responded to in a variety of ways – either being accepted and reinforced, or resisted
13 and challenged.

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27 Equipping researchers with the tools and processes to capture these complexities and
28 to describe how leadership is accomplished in situ – more or less collaboratively (although
29 not necessarily in harmony) – among different people and in different interactional contexts,
30 is one concrete way in which applied linguistic and pragmatic research can make important
31 contributions to leadership scholars across disciplines. However, in spite of this huge
32 potential to make important contributions to leadership research in other disciplines and to
33 directly address some of the current debates in critical leadership studies, most studies
34 conducted in applied linguistics and pragmatics fail to be acknowledged outside of their own
35 disciplinary silo; their findings tend to be overlooked, and, as a consequence, their voices are
36 often not heard in current debates about leadership discourse. However, we believe that this is
37 a missed opportunity, and that research in applied linguistics and pragmatics has a lot to offer
38 to leadership research in business and organisational sciences, and especially to critical
39 leadership studies. It is, therefore, about time that researchers in both disciplines establish a
40 more systematic and open on-going dialogue with each other.

Towards a more open and engaging dialogue

This paper has addressed the current lack of imagination and innovation in leadership research lamented by Tourish (2015) and the need for a “radical rethinking” called for by Alvesson (1996), by providing some concrete suggestions of how leadership research in business and organisational sciences could benefit from engaging in a more open and systematic dialogue with leadership research conducted in applied linguistics and pragmatics. We have argued that it is about time that the silos between these disciplines are broken down to enable a more productive cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches. Such an endeavour, as we have shown, would be particularly beneficial for critical leadership studies, as applied linguistics and pragmatic research can offer the analytical tools and processes to support critical leadership researchers in their quest to challenge hegemonic notions of leadership, by moving beyond simplistic and often problematic leader-follower dichotomies (e.g. Collinson, 2011, 2017) and providing empirical evidence to capture leadership in situ, thereby supporting (or possibly challenging) current theorisations of leadership and generating “wider implications for conceptualisations of leadership” (Choi and Schnurr, 2014: 18).

Focusing on these two aspects, we have analysed three examples of leadership discourse to illustrate what could be gained by such an approach. Our analyses have identified and described some of the concrete discursive processes through which leadership is shared and co-produced among different people throughout an interaction, and how, by portraying themselves in particular ways (e.g. as being particularly knowledgeable (Example 1) or innovative and having the answer to a problem (Example 2)), different individuals make claims for leadership, which are then responded to by others who may affirm (Example 3) or reject (Example 2) these claims. Such an analysis of the collaborative construction and

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3 negotiation of leadership – on a turn-by-turn basis as an interaction unfolds (Clifton, 2006,
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5 2012) – has also provided evidence for claims that these processes do not always occur
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7 harmoniously and that, in fact, not every attempt at leadership is successful (Examples 1 and
8
9 2). Rather, situated power relations are socially constructed, and do not always necessarily
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11 get rationalised or reinforced, but may also sometimes be challenged and resisted (e.g.
12
13 Collinson, 2014, 2017).
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17 In addition to providing empirical evidence to feed into current theoretical debates, a
18
19 more systematic and open engagement with research in applied linguistics and pragmatics
20
21 could also lead to a rethinking of methodological and analytical issues with the aim of
22
23 facilitating and supporting attempts to capture the “everyday work of leadership” that
24
25 Alvesson and Spicer (2104: 53) and other critical leaderships scholars call for. Such an
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27 engagement could lead, as we have suggested, to a rethinking of methodological approaches
28
29 and a new set of analytical questions. Based on conceptualisations of leadership as co-
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31 constructed, shared, resisted, contested, and continuously (but not necessarily harmoniously)
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33 negotiated in and through interaction, guiding questions for an enhanced analysis could take a
34
35 more exploratory form and would stimulate more data-driven conceptualisations of
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37 leadership processes, rather than being constrained by a priori – and often person- or
38
39 position-centred – assumptions. Such questions could include: “Where is leadership (in the
40
41 plural) happening?”, “Who is participating in leadership (and who is not)?”, “How are power
42
43 dynamics and agency enacted and negotiated among a team?”, “How (as well as by whom
44
45 and to what effect) are situated power relations either reinforced or challenged?”, “How is
46
47 this (discursively and usually collectively (although not necessarily harmoniously))
48
49 accomplished?”, and “What responses do the various claims at leadership generate?”. These
50
51 questions directly address (and largely avoid) problematic leader-follower dichotomies which
52
53 often form the basis of leadership research in business and organisational sciences.
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3 Although the focus of this paper was on several concrete issues relating to theoretical
4 and conceptual debates, as well as the methodological and analytical approaches that current
5 leadership scholarship are grappling with, the ideas and discussions presented here could
6 equally well be applied to other issues. For example, they could bring fresh air to some of the
7 discussions around relational leadership. Drawing on some of the tools and processes
8 illustrated in the analyses in this paper could, thus, also lead to new insights into the
9 “relational dynamics by which leadership is developed” and the specific processes and
10 dynamics through which “relationships form and develop” – which are two main avenues for
11 future research for relational leadership outlined by Uhl-Bien (2006: 672). Research
12 conducted within applied linguistics and pragmatics may also help in addressing many of the
13 other questions currently on the research agenda for relational leadership, including “How do
14 effective leadership relationships develop, and [...] what are the relational processes that
15 comprise effective collective relational leadership practice?” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2012: 312).
16 Due to the widely acknowledged central role that language and communication play in the
17 formation and development of relationships, the discourse analytical tools and processes
18 regularly used by researchers in applied linguistics and pragmatics seem particularly geared
19 to advance thinking around these issues – by “reveal[ing] how previously ‘abstract’
20 constructs can be made visible in talk” (Clifton, 2006: 217; Kelly, 2008), as showcased in the
21 analyses above.
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44 There are endless possibilities of where research in applied linguistics and pragmatics
45 could make important contributions to current leadership scholarship across disciplines. This,
46 to date, largely overlooked research should, therefore, be taken more seriously, and a
47 concerted effort should be made to more systematically and enthusiastically engage with this
48 “other” branch of leadership research. It clearly has the potential to become a valuable ally in
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the endeavour to challenge hegemonic perspectives and to denaturalise leadership, thereby bringing much needed fresh air to the current state of leadership research.

While the examples and arguments presented in this paper have inevitably been influenced by our own research and our own thinking, we hope that future research may find some of them useful and will take up and address some of the issues identified here. We agree with Uhl-Bien et al. (2012: 319) that this “is an exciting time to be in leadership research”, and we believe that a more engaging, open and systematic exchange of ideas between different fields of leadership research will enable us to address the conceptual, analytical and methodological challenges that leadership research is currently facing.

Transcription conventions

[laughs]	paralinguistic features in square brackets
+	pause of up to one second
... // ... \	simultaneous speech
... / ... \	
(are)	transcriber’s best guess at an unclear utterance
?	rising or question intonation
[drawls] : ... :	drawling of words in between the colons
()	unclear utterance
(0.5)	pause of 0.5 seconds

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