

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN



## **Interpretative management in business meetings**

### **Understanding managers' interactional strategies through conversation analysis**

Nielsen, Mie Femø

*Published in:*  
Journal of Business Communication

*Publication date:*  
2009

*Document version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Nielsen, M. F. (2009). Interpretative management in business meetings: Understanding managers' interactional strategies through conversation analysis. *Journal of Business Communication*, 46(1), 23-56.

# INTERPRETATIVE MANAGEMENT IN BUSINESS MEETINGS

## Understanding Managers' Interactional Strategies Through Conversation Analysis

Mie Femø Nielsen  
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

---

*Middle managers interpret experiences and observations of employees and relate them to organizational contexts, practices, and strategies. By analyzing authentic verbal communication between middle managers and employees, this article will draw five conclusions about how interpretational work support organizational goals and values: 1. Middle managers and employees collaborate in interpreting tasks in relation to organizational context; 2. This interpretative work is based on language acquisition: learning the vocabulary of the organization; 3. The managers articulate the process, explicitly defining reality and influencing language use; 4. Employees show expectation of having their experiences interpreted by managers; 5. Employees may challenge managers with competing interpretations. This article will contribute to the study of leadership communication by combining organization communication theory and conversation analytic methodology. The article shows important ways in which middle managers "do leadership": by contextualizing employee actions and bringing employee perceptions in accordance with executive-level perceptions of organizational practices.*

**Keywords:** *business meeting; leadership; middle manager; professional interaction; interpretation; managing meaning; conversation analysis*

---

How do employees get equipped to look at the organizational context in a way that promotes actions and decisions, which furthers the organization's strategic interests? How is the individual employee's daily practice connected to and reflective of executive-level strategy? And what is the role of middle managers in obtaining such accordance? What do managers do when interacting with their employees? How can the interactional practices of leadership be studied? These are questions to be explored in this article.

---

Mie Femø Nielsen is associate professor at University of Copenhagen, Denmark, doing research on business meeting interaction and leadership as communicative and interactional practices. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mie Femø Nielsen, Dept. of Scandinavian Studies and Linguistics, Njalsgade 120, DK-2300 Copenhagen; e-mail: femoe@hum.ku.dk.

Journal of Business Communication, Volume 46, Number 1, January 2009 23-56

DOI: 10.1177/0021943608325752

© 2009 by the Association for Business Communication

Being socialized into an organizational culture is about learning the organizational codes and discourses. Organizational culture is something to be acquired and interactionally constructed and negotiated, while at the same time setting the context for the learning process and the ongoing negotiation and construction. Middle managers, like department heads, play a substantial role in securing that executive-level strategies result in action on the part of the employees, so that a cultural value be established and/or affirmed.

Interpretative management is my term for what middle managers, the department heads, are doing when trying to teach employees to think the way the organization thinks. On a very local level, the employees are turn-at-talk by turn-at-talk being socialized to look upon the world through the eyes of the organization. Managers interpret the actions, experiences, and observations of the employees and relate them to the way the organization views the world. And the employees collaborate in letting the middle managers interpret their actions, experiences, and observations.

This article will show how the middle managers and their employees collaborate in interpreting the organizational tasks in relation to the context of the organization, how this is also a matter of language acquisition, how the managers articulate the process, and how the employees collaborate. The article will show how the employees on the one hand expect to have their experiences interpreted and on the other hand may produce competing interpretations.

Employees are socialized to look upon the world through the glasses of the organization (Mintzberg, 1983; Schein, 1985; Stohl, 1986). Managers interpret the experiences and observations of the employees and relate them to organizational contexts, practices, and strategies.

Members of an organization need this interpretative work. Social agents do not have full knowledge of the consequences of their decisions but need to act in expectation of a certain outcome, which builds on their experience and the available information (Simon, 1946). Members of an organization will strive for more certainty, since uncertainty limits the organization's efficiency and ability to plan ahead (Galbraith, 1974). The complexity and changeability of the postmodern society gives a constant need for reflexivity and constant revision of assumptions (Giddens, 1991). Organizational socialization involves not only acquiring the right attitude and behavior but also attributing meaning to behavior and organizational values (Stohl, 1986). An important aspect of socialization is members' sharing of experiences and mutual learning (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In this process, the leader plays an important role as teacher in building

reflection and viewing the organization as a coherent and dynamic process (Senge, 1990).

In this article, I will discuss how middle managers interact with their employees when teaching them to think and act in accordance with the strategic interests of the organization. Not much attention has been given to apply conversation analytic methods to study how this reflexivity is performed as an interactional practice in authentic oral communication in organizational everyday life. But recently, the method has proven very useful for studying leadership practices as well as business meeting interaction (Asmuß, 2006, 2007, 2008; Boden, 1994; Clifton, 2006a, 2006b; Ford, 2008a, 2008b, in press; Kangasharju, 1998, 2006, 2007, 2008; Mazeland, 2006, 2008; Nielsen, 1999, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Nikko, 2006, 2007; Svennevig, 2006, 2008).

The data are from department meetings in five Danish firms and organizations, in each of which between 1 and 9 meetings were recorded. Fifteen of the meetings have been recorded on audiotape and videotape, two on audiotape only. This study included departments of communication, personnel, research or public affairs. The meetings have been transcribed according to an adaptation of the Gail Jefferson transcript notation system (see appendix) and then analyzed from a conversation analytic perspective. All companies and persons in this study have been given pseudonyms.

The grounded analysis is discussed and put into perspective by organization theory and organizational communication theory. In the article, six excerpts are analyzed to illustrate typical interactions from the data. These examples represent generalizations about typical communication processes in the meetings studied. The excerpts from so-called "routine" leadership communication within organizations show specific leadership practices of middle managers in collaboration with their employees.

The article will draw five conclusions about how interactional strategies in verbal exchanges between middle managers and employees come to support organizational goals and values:

1. Middle managers and employees collaborate in interpreting the tasks in relation to the context of the organization.
2. This interpretative work is based on language acquisition: learning the vocabulary of the organization.
3. The managers articulate the process, explicitly defining reality and consciously influencing language use.
4. Employees expect to have their experiences interpreted and express this expectation to managers.
5. Employees may produce competing interpretations and challenge managers with them.

Interpretation management is achieved in collaboration between managers and employees, negotiating the validity of interpretations.

### **COLLABORATIVE INTERPRETATION OF TASKS IN RELATION TO THE CONTEXT OF THE ORGANIZATION**

An example from a meeting in the communications department of a large Danish firm, here called Multi, shows how middle managers and employees typically collaborate in interpreting everyday tasks in relation to the context of the organization. Multi is a company with divisions in Europe, United States, and Asia, operating in a range of industries. I will show how manager-employee interaction supports organizational values by socializing employees to the organization, how middle managers and employees collaborate in interpretation, and how this can happen through a process of categorizing and labeling.

At the meeting, the employees are taking turns around the table at reporting on their ongoing work projects. The editor (Klaus) of the internal magazines has been giving a report on what he has been working on for the past week and what he plans to be doing throughout the forthcoming week, and in Example 1, he has reached one of his last things to report. He begins the report before the manager (Hans) initiates clarification. The manager's secretary (Jonna) and a younger employee (Louise) also participate in the exchange (Excerpt 1).

The sequence starts with Klaus presenting a new topic, Køge Business School, which has asked him to come and give a talk. The manager

#### **Excerpt 1: KØGE HANDELSSKOLE (Køge Business School)**

- 
- 1 Kl: ↑Kø:e Handelsskole  
Køge Business School
- 2 ?: ((klik))  
((click))
- 3 Kl: de har (.) bedt om at vi kommer ned  
they have (.) asked if we will come down
- 4 Kl: å (0.3) holder et foredrag [(?for dem?)]  
and (0.3) give a talk [(?to them?)]
- 5 Ha: >>|ja de har| bedt<< DIG om å kom:  
|yeah they have| asked YOU to come
- 6 ned ikk?  
down right?
- 

*(continued)*

## Excerpt 1 (continued)

- 7 (0.6)
- 8 ? : [ ((tegnelyd))  
[ ((sound of scribbling))
- 9 Ha: ((uf.))=  
((incompreh.))
- 10 Kl: =ja:,  
yeah,
- 11 (0.4)
- 12 Jo: det- min lærer kommer derfra  
that- my teacher comes from there
- 13 ? : ja, ja.  
yeah, yeah.
- 14 (0.6)
- 15 Kl: .hh ↑me:n ø:h-  
.hh ↑but e:h-
- 16 Kl: ↑å de har hundrede ø:h handelselever  
↑and they have a hundred e:h business students
- 17 de gern ve ha at vi holder foredrag for  
they would like us to give a talk to
- 18 (0.6)
- 19 Kl: men da:r ku vi måske så lave et eller andet?  
but the:re perhaps we could do something?
- 20 (1.1)
- 21 Lo: de:t [hver gang du ikk] gider et'elandet  
tha:t's [every time you don't] care for something
- 22 Kl: [SAMMEN HVA?]  
[TOGETHER HUH?]
- 23 Lo: så ryger den L<sub>1</sub> over på den anden [si(h)d a(h)f bo(h)r|det]  
then it goes di[RECTly to the other] [si(h)de o(h)f t(h)e ta(h)b|le]
- 24 Kl: [\*ARV (.) DET] for ma:red=  
[\*OUCH (.) THAT'S] [too much=
- 25 Ha: = [øh]  
= [eh]
- 26 Ha: DE::t er internt [det der=>>det ka l] godt li: dis<<kuter bagefter=  
THA::t is internal [that=>>that you'll] have to dis<<cuss afterwards=
- 27 Kl: [ja, ja.]  
[yeah, yeah.]
- 28 Kl: =.h[ja]  
=.h[yeah]
- 29 Ha: [men nu] har han MEDdelt at da:r (.) måske er en  
[but now] he has anNOUNced that the:re (.) perhaps is a
- 30 mulighed for noed [profi] lering  
possibility of doing some [PR] work

## Excerpt 1 (continued)

- 31 Kl: [ja.]  
[yeah].
- 32 (.)
- 33 Lo: [hvor] [når e:r]  
[when] [i:s]
- 34 ?: [(?ja?)]  
[(?yeah?)]
- 35 Jo: [jar mener vi hade Køge [stående te august] i år  
[I believe we had Køge [on for August] this year
- 36 Kl: [det blir anden halvdel af janu[ar] =  
[it will be second half of Janu[ary]
- 37 Jo: [ikk?]=  
[right?]=
- 38 Ha: = ja  
= yeah
- 39 (0.4)
- 40 Kl: ja. [↑jam det rigt nok]  
yeah. [↑yes but that's true alright]
- 41 ?: [(uf.)]  
[(unint.)]
- 42 Kl: hun ringede jo : å : : [sna]kkede godt for sig  
she called y'know and [coa]xed us
- 43 Jo: [ja]  
[yeah]
- 44 Ha: gut  
fine
- 45 Kl: så det en form for (.) ↑road↓show  
so that is a kind of (.) ↑road↓show

corrects him, substituting “we” with “you,” underlining the fact that it is Klaus in particular who has been invited. The correction is produced as an “understanding check” (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977)—that is, a turn that is designed to be understood as the speaker checking his or her understanding of the preceding talk but here it might as well be performing the social action “praise,” since “you” is stressed. Following this correction there is a pause, after which Klaus enters with a late and prolonged “yeah” (line 10). The secretary then presents a fact (line 12), which does not get much of a response. The dismissive “yeah” from Klaus seems to support the analysis, indicating that the manager is not checking on understanding but instead stressing that it is Klaus in particular who is going to Køge. By choosing the word “we,” Klaus shows to be unwilling to stress the fact that it was him in particular who was invited.

Once again, Klaus takes the floor, first with a long inbreath and then with the turn onset “↑but e:h-” (line 15) followed by “↑and they have a hundred e:h business students” (line 16), after which he recycles his first turn of the sequence, not following up on the correction by the manager. In his recycling, in line 17 he retains the original “we” in “they would like us to give a talk to.” He continues as if nothing had happened. After a short pause, he proposes to cooperate by “but the:re perhaps we could do something?” The proposal is unspecified. This could be a proposal to make a “presentation” together, or to swap assignments. The post completor “TOGETHER HUH?” adds the possibility of going to Køge together.

We do not really know to whom he addresses this proposal, but it is most likely that he is looking at Louise, who is sitting in front of him across the table, as she is the one responding to the proposal (line 21-23).

The conversation analytic concept “sequential preference” (Pomerantz 1984; Schegloff, 1988) is a tool to describe the phenomenon that when one turn at talk (the first of a pair of utterances, a first pair part) is produced by a speaker, the production of a fitted and appropriate response (a second pair part) by a next speaker is projected and expected, and a fitted response is preferred. A question projects and prefers an answer; an invitation projects and prefers an acceptance, meaning that the preferred responding action is produced to be seen as the default case, making the rejection or noncompliance interactionally more difficult to produce, typically involving delay, accounting work, and mitigation. Noncompliance with this creates explanation slots (Antaki 1994).

At this point in the interaction, there is a sequential preference for acceptance, but she does not give one. Instead, she responds (line 21-23) to the fact that the proposal has been uttered and does not treat it as a proposal but as a handing over of a task, and she implies that giving a talk at the business school is something which Klaus does not feel like doing, which is why he passes it on to the other side of the table. Her response indicates that she also does not herself find the task particularly attractive. Klaus’ response treats her utterance as an accusation (line 24). The “THAT’S” is even emphatic, by which he implies that this is not the first time she has accused him and that this time it cannot be ignored.

Klaus’s and Louise’s turns are produced in overlap. And at this point, her turn changes character. She starts out by being very antagonistic and then changes it to a laughable, treating something as worthy of laughter. “tha:t’s every time you don’t care for something then it goes diRECTly to the other si(h)de o(h)f t(h)e ta(h)ble.” With this late sequential positioning, her initial attack is retrospectively and implicitly turned into a suggestion that she was “only kidding” and that everybody should laugh at it together.



The manager once again intervenes. He shuts down the confrontation by underlining that this is a private matter between the two of them, which they must resolve afterward. Several times during his turn, the manager gets signs of approval or even acceptance from Klaus, who both responds that this is a private matter and that it must be discussed afterward. He is the only one responding to the manager's turn, although the manager turned to both him and Louise, making a response sequentially relevant for both. This could be an indication that Klaus is more satisfied with the manager's interference than she is. With this matter closed, the question of what to do with Køge Business School still remains unresolved.

Following his second "yeah" (line 28), produced on an inbreath, the manager continues his turn by saying that "but now he has anNOUNced that the:re (.) perhaps is a possibility of doing some PR work." This is remarkable in two ways. First of all, he changes from having addressed himself to a plural "you," meaning both of them, to speaking of a "he," who has told something. Once again, Klaus utters a small "yeah," this time with a final intonation, a confirmation. That this part of the manager's turn is most probably addressed to Louise is indicated by the local context, which leaves no doubt that "he" refers to Klaus, that the information given concerns the talk at the business school, that the two parties involved are Louise and Klaus, and that Klaus cannot be the addressee of the utterance because he is mentioned in it in the third person. There are other persons present at the meeting, but because they have not taken part in the discussion, he must be addressing Louise.

The other interesting thing is that with his unit "the:re (.) perhaps is a possibility doing some PR work," the manager makes a reframing and a reinterpretation of the talk at Køge Business School. By doing this, he assigns status to the task, while at the same time showing how these kinds of tasks are to be interpreted: not as tedious tasks that nobody wants to do but as important assignments in harmony with the overall goals of the department, and perhaps even an important part in the survival of the firm.

By stating the category, in which this talk belongs (i.e., "PR work"), he probably at the same time shows to whom this task belongs (at this point though, there is also the slight possibility that Louise is punished for her outburst by being assigned to go to Køge). After a slight pause (line 32), Louise finally responds (line 33) by asking when it has to take place, which could mean that she is trying to fit the talk into her plans.

This conflict seems to be resolved simply by categorizing the task according to the general universe of tasks in the department. The manager interprets the task in relation to organizational context. So even though the manager initially states that this conflict is a private matter and has no

place in a department meeting, he works to resolve it during the meeting. At the same time, he has proven himself a manager capable of cutting through and making decisions that are not popular with all of the employees. This way, he indirectly states that he is the one making decisions, and he also shows how conflicts are resolved and tasks assigned, as well as what is okay to say in a meeting and what is not.

The matter is settled at line 44, what the manager makes evident by uttering the German “gut,” acknowledging that the matter is done with and everything is fine. The sequence ends with Klaus, sounding very pleased, uttering that this is a kind of road show (line 45), which is not contested by anyone, not even Louise. This seems to confirm that the manager has delegated the task to Louise by labeling the task “PR work” (line 30). Earlier in the meeting, they have been talking about doing road shows abroad for potential investors being part of Louise’s job (not shown).

The manager does not here initiate a special session in the meeting devoted to showing the employees how to look at their tasks in relation to the overall organizational goals and the organizational context. He integrates this focus in the turn-by-turn discussion of small conversational objects initiated by others. Here the category “PR work” is introduced, out of the blue and not locally occasioned, but as a formal category by which to interpret a tedious task to give it priority and delegation.

The case of doing interpretative management in this sequence is the way the middle manager interprets a task to further managerial orientations, such as conflict management and task delegation. It shows interactional strategies for middle managers and employees, collaborating in interpreting certain tasks in relation to the context of the organization.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

The organizational dictionary of relevant categories, concepts, and terms is not “just there,” available to all employees. This study revealed that middle managers introduce new words when reporting from executive-level management meetings, and employees introduce new words in discussions with reference to current discussions in the department or with reference to current debate in media and business schools.

What is particularly interesting is how members of an organization may be oriented to using the right words, how they may be oriented to acquiring certain words as the proper ones to use when discussing matters. At the department meetings, there is a continual adaptation from both managers and employees to synchronize employees’ individual expressions

and the organizational dictionary in the sense of collection of words and their meaning. The employees participate actively in this process. New words or pieces of information are assimilated according to this, and the choice of words can be seen as a consequence of this perception of the world. In my data, there is a high degree of attention to the choice of words, the orientation toward choice of words, and the acquisition of a certain vocabulary.

An example of this can be seen in Excerpt 2, taken from a meeting in the personnel department in a large service company (here given the pseudonym MOP) operating mainly in Scandinavia. Two human resource consultants (Kirsten and Vanessa) orient to vocabulary while the manager (Peter) collaborates with Kirsten in producing the best interpretation of how to look at the fact that they have to fire 630 employees in the company.

**Excerpt 2: FORHANDLINGSANSVARLIGE (Negotiation responsible)**

---

- 1 Ki: mindre antal nu  
smaller number now
- 2 (0.6)
- 3 Pe: det forstå'r jar ikk Kirsten=  
that I don't understand Kirsten=
- 4 ? : ( . )
- 5 Ki: jo, (0.2) ↑Danmark har  
well, (0.2) ↑Denmark has
- 6 seks hundred tredve ( . ) mennesker  
six hundred and thirty ( . ) people
- 7 der ska bespares  
that have to be cut
- 8 Pe: ja.  
yeah.
- 9 (0.2)
- 10 Ki: så sjr du så ↑vi har no:n projekter i personaleafdelingen  
then you say ↑we have some projects in the personanel department
- 11 som vi er (0.4) ~ansvarli:- [fo:r] [forhandling] ansvarli: for  
that we are (0.4) ~responsible [for] [negotiation] responsib| e for
- 12 Va: [forha] ndlings[ansvarli:]  
[nego]tiation [responsible]
- 13 Pe: [ ja, ] ja,  
[ yeah, ] yeah,
- 14 (0.5)
- 15 Ki: ↑å- (0.2) det- ( . ) >>det ve så sie så i Danmark ska TALlet  
and (0.2) that- ( . ) >>that will then say that in Denmark the NUMber has
- 16 selfølig stadig<<væk være seks hundred og fy:rre  
to be of course still<< six hundred and forty
- 17 ( . )
- 18 men ↑dar ikk non dar har ansvaret for de sekshundred å fyrrer  
but ↑there's no one who has the responsibility for the six hundred and forty
-

The conversation analytic concept of “conversational repair” (Schegloff et al., 1977) refers to the phenomenon of speakers undertaking, and orienting to, systematic processes of dealing with communicative problems of some sort, fixing some trouble (e.g., with hearing, understanding, or producing the talk) in talk.

In the data, such conversational repair work may appear when there does not seem to be any doubt about the meaning in the given context. Kirsten’s pause before uttering the word “responsible” (line 11) could mark a search for the right word to use, which is then provided. The pause and the smiling voice show an orientation toward choosing the right words and perhaps an anticipation of not getting it right. Still, in this environment of word search and disalignment, Kirsten is not just supplied with the right word, she is also mildly sanctioned for using the wrong word (note in line 11-12 how the syllable “hand” is stressed in a way that one would do when not just offering a better version but stressing a correct version that has been offered again and again). Kirsten immediately adopts the new word (line 11, in overlap with Vanessa in line 12).

The expression “negotiation responsible” is not part of the Danish lexicon. It is apparently part of the organizational lexicon in this company, and it seems to be crucial in this organization whether you hold “responsibility” or “negotial responsibility,” because they orient to getting it right. The difference seems to be whether you hold the responsibility for implementing the firings or hold the responsibility for negotiating the firings; the difference is a matter of degree of delegation of authority and of the strength of the power bases of the divisions of the company as counterparts to the executive level. Negotiating power seems to be important in this company, as opposed to the CEO’s execution power (this observation is supported by other sequences in the data, not shown in this article). But how to navigate in this context is not treated as something to negotiate, but as something to be taught and to understand.

That such repair is not to be seen as an orientation toward error correction is evidenced immediately after. In lines 16 and 18, the same employee is twice talking about the number 640, but at this point in the meeting, it has already been established that they are talking about 630 (lines 5-8). She is not corrected for using the wrong number, which shows that corrections are not about errors (Jefferson, 1974, 1987; Schegloff et al., 1977) but about treating something as “a correct-able,” something that could and should be corrected.

This exchange is not about understanding and error correction but about orientation toward using the right expressions for organizational practices, procedures or processes, thereby constituting and maintaining

organizational practices, procedures, or processes. Such fundamental linguistic practices are one of the important ways that interpretative management works: by socializing the members of the organization to talk in a way that supports certain interpretations of how the company should be led by means of which such leadership is enabled. This interpretative work is based on language acquisition: learning the vocabulary of the organization.

### ARTICULATION OF THE INTERPRETATIVE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

My data show that often managers are not necessarily very subtle in this process of language acquisition. They may be rather explicit. Excerpt 3 is an example of this; it is a part of a long sequence at a department meeting in the personnel department from before. The manager (Peter) has been reporting from a “leader meeting” (his words), and two human resource consultants (Lone and Kirsten) are inquiring about how to look at the large project in which 630 employees are laid off throughout the Danish divisions, and each of these 630 terminations of employment forms a separate “project” (his words). The manager uses the word “adjustment” (line 20) to describe the downsizing and explains that this is a word to use.

#### Excerpt 3: DET ER DE ORD MAN BRUGER (That's y'know the words to use)

- 1 Pe: forsøg på det  
attempt at that
- 2 Lo: å der ka man så si: at det projekt som (.) som Sigurd har ansvaret for  
and there one can say that that project which Sigurd is responsible for
- 3 .h (.) han har i virkeligheden sån EN side  
.h (.) he has in effect ONE such page
- 4 (.)
- 5 Ki: °hm°.
- 6 (0.4)
- 7 Lo: å der har han nåed firs procent af sin stre °(h)° ger,  
and there he has managed eighty percent of his marks
- 8 (1.0)
- 9 Pe: [nej] (.) [det ikk] det ikk [rigtig] [vel] fordi  
[no] (.) [that's not] that's not [correct] [right] because
- 10 Lo: [ka man] [si: ikk] [NÅ] det  
[one could] [say right] [OH] that's
- 11 ? : [nej] [det ikk - -]  
[no] [that's not - -]

(continued)

**Excerpt 3 (continued)**

- 12 Lo: heller ikk rigt[ig].  
not correct ei[ther]
- 13 Ki: [nej]  
[no]
- 14 (0.2)
- 15 Pe: du ka si: (.) du ka si:=der ku vae:r et projekt her  
you may say (.) you may say there could be a project here
- 16 der hed (0.2) for eksempel (0.8) ø:h (.)  
that was called (0.2) for instance (0.8) e:h (.)
- 17 Lo: [h]
- 18 Lo: hrm
- 19 (0.2)
- 20 Pe: ti:(.)pasning det jo de ord man bruger ikk,  
ad(.)]ustment that's y'know the words to use right,
- 21 (0.4)
- 22 Lo: [hh m]
- 23 Pe: tilpasning af udviklingsafdelingen  
adjustment of the department of development
- 24 (0.9)
- 25 Lo: å det står så som et projekt  
and that then stands as one project

Here, the manager both defines a reality and establishes a use of language. An interesting feature is the fact that the manager thematizes this and then distances himself from the lexical operation while at the same time validating it. The choice of the word “adjustment” (line 20) for the cuts establishes a connection to a microeconomic discourse, where the number of employees must be adjusted to the tasks of the company and the economic conditions. The word presupposes that the staff has hitherto not been adjusted (i.e., the number of employees has been too high, and that this malfunction is now being removed). By word choice, it is defined not just how to talk about layoff and downsizing, but also how to think about layoff and downsizing.

By promoting certain interpretations of organizational practices, procedures, or processes, the middle manager is enabling such organizational practices, procedures, or processes, which is exactly what a middle manager is supposed to do. That can be done in many ways. The middle manager is here leading the department by encouraging employees

to interpret organizational practices, procedures, or processes a particular way—that is, the way that executive level has been talking to him and the other middle managers at the meeting he is reporting from in the excerpt above. Getting the organization to accept organizational practices, procedures, or processes is a practice and a process in itself. And by distancing himself from the practice while practicing it, he makes the maneuver visible as such. This exchange shows how the managers articulate the process, explicitly defining reality and consciously influencing language use, enacting yet distancing from the process.

The last two exchanges has shown how interpretative work in organizations is based on language acquisition and how the managers may articulate the process of defining reality by consciously influencing language use. After having focused on the organizational language acquisition in the last two sections of this article, I will now return to the broader discussion of interpretative management.

### **EMPLOYEES' EXPECTATIONS TO HAVE THEIR EXPERIENCES INTERPRETED**

The analysis thus far may suggest that managers just interpret and frame, perhaps even invent new words to support the process, and then employees simply absorb everything. That, however, is not the case. Leadership is interactionally constructed, and interpretations are negotiated.

My data clearly show that employees expect to have their experiences defined and to collaborate in negotiating interpretations. This can be seen in another excerpt from the same meeting in the personnel department in MOP (Excerpt 4). The discussion is still about the downsizing, and a human resource consultant (Kirsten) produces an interpretation that is rejected by the manager (Peter). Kirsten then articulates that this is not the way in which she should see the situation and accepts this. The context of this meeting is an informal meal, because the meeting takes place in the morning, and the employees eat breakfast before and during the meeting (having coffee, the, bread, butter and cheese). This is a tradition in the department with respect to the weekly department meeting. They take turns at bringing fresh bread, butter, and so forth from a baker's shop.

The employee makes an effort to prepare (line 1) the production of an interpretation of the situation, preempts a potential annoyance of her

**Excerpt 4: DET ER IKKE SÅDAN JEG SKAL SE PÅ DET (That's not the way I shall look at it)**

- 1 Ki: ja- jar- je- jeg bliver >>nu ved jar godt jar hænger mig lidt i de der<<  
a-I- I- I get >>now I know very well that I cling a bit to those<<
- 2 sekshundred[tra:dv]e. ↑ikk  
six hundred[and thir]ty. right
- 3 Pe: [hm,]
- 4 Ki: >>men et lan sted<< hvis [Danmark ikk når] de sekshundredtradv se det  
>>but somewhere<< if [Denmark doesn't get to] the six hundred and thirty then it's
- 5 ?: [((?gir du mig li smørret? + uf.))]  
[((?will you pass me the butter? + unint.))]
- 6 Ki: vel Sigurds røv dar på komedie  
it's I guess Sigurd's ass that's on the line ((translation of Danish idiom))
- 7 (0.2)
- 8 ?k: °ej°  
no
- 9 Ki: å ikk så me: get de enk=  
and not so much the individual=
- 10 Pe: =nej det ve jeg ikk sie er rig[ tig ] ø:hm:  
=no that I will not say is [true]e:hm:
- 11 Ki: [ø:hm]  
[e:hm]
- 12 (0.3)
- 13 Ki: de:t ikk sån? jar ska [ se det, [↑okay ]  
it's not like that? I shall [see it, [↑okay ]
- 14 Pe: [nej] [det ve ] væ:r det ve væ:re ø:hm (0.3)  
[no] [that will] be: that will be e:hm (0.3)
- 15 Va: de [enkelte] [°lande°]  
the [individual] [countries]
- 16 ?m: [r hrm]
- 17 Pe: [de ] enkelte funktionschefer (.) som ve f- ha non  
[the] individual heads of functions (.) that will g- have some
- 18 forklarings (.) problemer  
explanation (.) problems
- 19 (0.3)
- 20 det ↑ik sikkert det gir problemer=>>for hvis de ka<< forklar det  
it's ↑not for sure that it will pose problems=>>because if they can<< explain it
- 21 så det jo god[ t nok, ]  
then it's y'know [all right]
- 22 Ki: [m:m]
- 23 (0.3)
- 24 Va: hvis der er non forudsætninger som pludsligør at de allivel ikk ku (.)  
if there are some conditions that suddenly (does/implicates) that they after all were not able (.)
- 25 implementere=hvis de sku ha et nyt system  
implement=if they were to have a new system
- 26 (0.2)
- 27 så ka de så forklare det ud fra det  
and then they can then explain it due to that



insistence to do that (line 1-2), produces the interpretation to be checked with the manager (line 2-9), “doing non next” to a colleague (line 8-9), not responding to it but going on as if it had not been produced. Still, she checks and accepts with no further ado that the interpretation by the manager is the most valid one: “i:t”s not like that? I shall see it”; “no” he responds in overlap; and then she produces the receipt “↑okay” in overlap with the beginning of his explanation (line 13-14), even though he at this point has not yet produced a better interpretation or accounted for the non-validity of hers and the better validity of his. He does that afterwards, after getting her acceptant response, and his accounted-for-interpretation is coproduced with one of the other employees (from line 14 and onward). But at lines 10 to 13, he has just rejected her interpretation, and that rejection gets her acceptance.

The orientation made visible by the employees to have the manager interpret the global context can be very explicit, with the employees asking questions and challenging the manager to do on-the-spot interpretations as if they held up a microphone to the manager. This can be illustrated by Excerpt 5, from a department meeting in the research department of a medical firm (here named Mikro) operating globally with international subdivisions. This meeting was recorded just after Easter. One employee (a scientist named Erik) refers to an interpretation, which the manager (a scientist named John) has hitherto expressed (A), but which now seems not to be in tune with the latest developments (B). “you must then (.) have a comment to that” (line 22-24), he says:

**Excerpt 5: DU MÅ DA HAVE EN KOMMENTAR TIL DET (You must then have a comment to that)**

- 
- 1 Er: du ha:r (0.4) gentagne gange gjort dig til talsmand for  
you have (0.4) repeatedly made yourself a spokesman for
- 2 a:t s:: (0.2) sku der udvides så var det på: (0.3) på kundesiden  
that w:: (0.2) were there to be expanded then it was on (0.3) on customer side
- 3 (0.8)
- 4 den udadvendte side å på: (0.2)  
the external side and on (0.2)
- 5 Jo: ja.  
yeah.
- 6 Er: [Produktionssiden  
the product side
- 7 Jo: ja.  
yeah
- 8 (1.0)
- 

(continued)

## Excerpt 5 (continued)

- 9 Er: m(h)- (0.4) hvordan: (0.3) forholder det sig ti:l (1.6) >>det der nu ser ud  
b(h)- (0.4) how (0.3) does that relate to (1.6) >>what now looks
- 10 som om<< at de:t er mere inden for: R (0.2) D: å udvikling å teknologi  
as if<< it is more inside R (0.2) D and development and technology
- 11 der ska udvides  
there is to be expanded
- 12 Jo: jamen nus har vi kun snakket om R å D afdelingerne  
yeah but now we have only talked about R and D departments
- 13 jeg er helt overbevist om at °der kommer til at  
I am absolutely convinced that °there is going to
- 14 ske en hel masse på den anden side oss°=  
happen a lot on the other side also°=
- 15 Er: =(°okay°?)
- 16 (1.0)
- 17 Jo: >>°det ske°<< det sker jo allerede:de ikke altså der er jo: (.)  
>>it happen<< it happens already right there's y'know (.)
- 18 Er: det lyder jo (.) for (0.3) i og med (.) det opslag allerede har været [der i][øh]  
it sounds y'know (.) for (0.3) because (.) this job advertisement already has been there in eh
- 19 Jo: [ja] [↓mm,]  
yeah mm,
- 20 Er: påsken her (0.2) .h som om at man (.) ve starte med (0.6) å ta  
Easter here (0.2) .h as if that one (.) will start by (0.6) taking the
- 21 teknologiområdet først  
technology area first
- 22 du må da=  
you must then=
- 23 Jo: =JA=  
=YES=
- 24 Er: =ha en kommentar te det  
=have a comment to that
- 25 (0.4)
- 26 Jo: jamen det er helt klart at man altså i R og D vil man nu overvinde ser det ud til  
yeah but that's all clear that one in R and D one will now overcome it looks like

Here the employee is not only asking the manager to interpret what seems contradictory but also actually challenges him to do so. He is doing a lot of preparatory work by pointing out a discrepancy between two interpretations that have been expressed: A, the company will first and foremost expand with respect to customer relations; and B, the company will first and foremost expand with respect to research and development. He starts by putting A into play—lines 1 to 4: “you have (0.4) repeatedly made yourself a spokesman of that w::: (0.2) were there to be expanded then it was on (0.3) on customer side (0.8) the external side and on (0.2) the product side”—and gets the manager’s confirmation (line 5 and 7). Then, he puts B into play—lines 9 to 11: “b(h)-(0.4) how (0.3) does that relate to (1.6) >>what now looks as if<< it is more inside R (0.2) D and development and technology there is to be

expanded". The manager immediately treats this discrepancy as not problematic as he produces the prognosis that A is soon to appear (lines 12 to 17). The employee does not seem to be satisfied with this, as he goes on—lines 18 to 21: "it sounds y'know (.) for (0.3) because (.) this ad already has been there in eh Easter here (0.2) .h as if that one (.) will start by (0.6) taking the technology area first"—putting his observation forward again, designing it not as a response to the response from the manager, but as a continuation and expansion of his own prior turn. He is stressing that B seems to be the case, meaning that the manager's prior interpretation, and prognosis for the future, has not been confirmed by the latest actions of the company. Then he expresses his expectation of the manager to be able to produce an explanation here and now that will reconcile the issue (lines 22-24). The manager is then taking upon him the task of doing this sort of explanatory work (line 26 and onward). He does not question the relevance of doing so or the right or relevance of the employee to ask him to do so. Later, the employee accepts the explanation given by the manager (not shown).

Note how the manager is distancing himself from the executive level by constructing himself as an observer and interpreter (lines 13 to 14 and 26), thereby also aligning with the employee. He is positioning himself explicitly as an observer and interpreter by producing observations and interpretations while simultaneously stating them as such. By assuring his employee of the affirmation of his interpretation when he says, "I am absolutely convinced that there is going to happen a lot on the other side also," he is making visible his own uncertainty as an interpreter, an uncertainty that would not have been present had he produced only affirmative declarations such as "there is going to happen a lot on the other side also."

A common trait in examples of this kind is the way in which all parties involved see the exchange as a matter of course. The employees seek an interpretation and take for granted that the manager can supply one, and the manager does not question whether he should or should not. The manager does not treat the challenge as unsuitable or unwelcome, nor do other employees present at the meeting.

The middle managers may be explicit in producing interpretations by stating them as such, thereby giving their interpretative work weaker affirmation, but they may also produce interpretations with high affirmation, stating them as "matter of fact" to be accepted or learned. The latter was seen in Excerpt 4 but is even more distinct in the next excerpt.

This exchange shows how employees expect to have their experiences interpreted and how they express this expectation to managers, treating the manager's interpretations as right interpretations and something for them

to acquire, or as problematic if not making sense as right interpretations, but never questioning the right and relevance of the manager to on the spot produce the best interpretation.

## COMPETITIVE INTERPRETATIONS AND CHALLENGES TO INTERPRETATIVE AUTHORITY

The organizational interpretations are constantly developed through talk-in-interaction. Thus, interpretative management does not take place in a vacuum; instead, there can be competition for the right to define a situation or to interpret the context. Excerpt 6 illustrates this competition in defining a situation. This is an excerpt from a meeting in Multi (the company from before with Klaus not being excited about going to give a talk at a business school). Prior to this meeting there had been a very long discussion of authority and responsibility. The discussion was initiated by the editor (Klaus) of the internal magazines, who is very frustrated by not being able to keep deadlines with the printers and distributors, because the division managers and top executives interfere in the last minute with “things that have to be in the issue,” resulting in his having to move around printing and publication dates, which makes production more expensive, which then makes it hard for him to stay within his budget. It takes the manager (Hans) several minutes to calm Klaus down (not shown) by reassuring him that no one will hold him responsible for exceeding the budget, and that he as head of the information department is doing a great job in trying to make other managers respect deadlines, but that the real problem is the CEO who cannot be controlled. Finally, he gets the editor’s acceptance of this. In Excerpt 6, Klaus is about to close the subject by recycling and summing up his frustration, when this exchange (in which Louise, Jón and Sigurd also participate) takes place:

### Excerpt 6: FORKERT BEMÆRKNING (Wrong remark)

**Excerpt 6: FORKERT BEMÆRKNING (Wrong remark)**

(MULTI-1;59:6 - 60:9)

- |   |     |   |
|---|-----|---|
| 1 | KL: | j(h)am altså(h) (.) det hele griver så maed ind i hinand[ n ] hele tiden<br>yeah but really (.) it all connects so much with each [ot] her all the time |
| 2 | Ha: | [a]<br>[yea]  |
| 3 |     | [(0.8)]   |
| 4 | ?:  | [((?bank i bordet m. papirstak og klikken med blyant?))]<br>[((?knocking on the table with a stack of papers and clicking with a pencil?))]             |
| 5 |     | (0.9)   |

(continued)

**Excerpt 6 (continued)**

- 6 Kl: å d- (.) ((klik)) (0.3) der er sgu en ide mæ de:t her-  
and th- (.) ((click)) (0.3) there're dammit an idea with this-  
7 (.)
- 8 Kl: med den her produktionsplan [jeg har læ:vet ikk?]  
with this production plan [I have made, right?]
- 9 Ha: (?[den fik d\_lu jo ve (.) d- (.) d-?]) / (?den anfægter  
jeg overhovedet ikk?)  
(?[that you also got]with (.) d- (.) d-?]) / (?that I'm  
not contesting at all?)
- 10 Ha: du ve oss ku:nn hø:re det- vi bakker dig FULDstændig op i det der  
you'll also be able to hear it- we're backing you up comPLETEly in that  
11 (0.3)
- 12 Kl: ja¿  
yeah¿  
13 (0.4)
- 14 Lo: hh (.) n(h)u,=  
hh (.) n(h)ow,=  
15 Jó: =vi gør bår ikk noed ve ed  
=only we're not doing anything about it  
16 (0.2)
- 17 Kl: ah him=  
18 Lo: =\*nej=  
=no=  
19 Ha: =de:t- jam det da [det da en forkert bemærkning  
=that's- well but that's[that's really a wrong remark  
20 ?: [h h h]  
21 (.)
- 22 Ha: ø:h (.) Jón  
e:h (.) Jón  
23 (.)
- 24 Jó: jam vi ↑k(h)an ikk gøre noed v(h)e ed=  
yeah but ↑we c(h)an't do anything ab(h)out it=  
25 Kl: =\*ai=  
=no=  
26 Kl: =[de:t altså hvis]  
=[it's really if]  
27 Jó: [det jo li: det] da:r har væed konklusionen,=  
[that's just what]has been the conclusion,=  
28 Kl: =\*ø:h jah - -  
=e:h yeah - -  
29 Ha: vi GØR [noed (?ve det?)]  
we're DOING[something (?about it?)]
- 30 Jó: [vi: a:l s:la:m: FULDT (.) FU[LDT (?forståelige?)]  
[we're all]comPLETEly (.) comPLETEly (?understanding?)  
31 Ha: [VI GØR NOED PÅ A:L] de QMråder vi kan  
[WE'RE DOING SOMETHING IN A:LL]the Areas we can

*(continued)*

## Excerpt 6 (continued)

- 32 (0.3)
- 33 men t- d- (0.2) vi ka ikk ta (.) den sidste (0.3) mand i ED  
but t- d- (0.2) we can't swear (.) the last (0.3) man IN
- 34 (0.5)
- 35 Jó: ↑↑nej  
↑↑no
- 36 (0.7)
- 37 Kl: nej[de:t] nemlig rigtig[t]  
no[that's]absolutely true[t]
- 38 Ha: [d- så]  
[d- so]
- 39 Jó: [å] så  
[and]then
- 40 Ha: å det å de:t de::t (.) det HAM der bestemmer  
and it's and it's i::t's (.) it's HIM who's in charge
- 41 (1.0)
- 42 Jó: så situationen er [(.) som] den ↑er.  
so the situation is [(.) like] it ↑is.
- 43 Lo: [jo men han-]  
[yes but he-]
- 44 (0.3)
- 45 Ha: \*jaer. (.) nu- IKK me:r om [det der]  
yeah. (.) now NOT any more[of that]
- 46 Kl: [nej]  
[no]
- 47 Ha: SLUT=  
FINISH=
- 48 Kl: =↑Okay, ↑så ha:r vi: ø:h (0.8)  
=↑Okay, ↑then we have e:h (0.8)
- 49 Si: he he he
- 50 Kl: fire ↑andre ting  
four ↑other things
- 51 vi ska ta stilling te  
we'll have to decide on
- 52 de:t e:r tema:e:rne=  
it's the themes=
- 53 Si: =tak skæbne=  
=my goodness=
- 54 Kl: =i (.) de (0.2) fire (.) magasiner  
=in (.) the (0.2) four (.) magazines
- 55 Kl: næst år  
next year

Here, Jón destroys all of what the manager has been building up by saying: “only we’re not doing anything about it” (line 15). This remark is produced as a challenge, since it goes directly against everything the manager has been said when reassuring Klaus; the remark seems to be doing some sort

of testing of the manager or testing the limits of producing interpretations in opposition to the view of the establishment. The manager responds by assessing and categorizing Jón's remark as "really (.) wrong" (line 19), and he then starts to argue against Jón's interpretation. Not only does he not agree, or wishes to explain some possible misunderstanding to Jón, but also rejects his whole intervention as being flat-out wrong. The editor is not being let down, they are doing something to help him, they are taking action, but still you can do nothing about the CEO (lines 29-33).

Even when there is such a competition for the right to interpret, this shows that the process is accepted; nobody questions the right of the manager to do this, as they only discuss the possible interpretations, not his right to interpret and to reject interpretations. Neither do they question his right to close the discussion.

What is interesting is that the exchange was initiated by Louise (line 14), who is also backing Jón up (line 18), and she is initiating a further discussion of the role of the CEO (line 43), but she is not only not responded to by the manager in the beginning (line 14-22), but also the manager is explicitly addressing who he is being challenged by and who he is counter challenging: Jón (line 22). Louise is not ratified as a party in the conflict.

Louise is about 25 to 30 years younger than Jón, from what can be inferred from the video recordings, and she has not been working in the department very long, while Jón has. Perhaps exchanges like this have taught Jón and the rest of the employees how to accept the pecking order. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Louise was the one to initiate the exchange. Perhaps she has only begun a socialization process in the organization. But what is certain is that organizational culture, structure, and understanding are achieved everyday through precisely such talk-in-interaction. In this particular instance, the employees' collaborate in negotiating values like responsibility, commitment, perseverance, loyalty, equality, fairness, credibility, and power, constituting them all as central, but when in conflict, some values may be overridden by executive privileges. Still, the employees treat the fact that they "are not doing anything about" such privileges as something accountable, meaning that even executive privileges are not just stated once and for all but needs to be constituted continually (e.g., in exchanges like the above where the middle manager must defend the rights of the CEO while simultaneously accounting for why his defense of executive privileges is not an indication of his being irresponsible, unreliable, unfair, despondent and uncommitted to his employees). His interpretative management is fundamental in securing the hitherto established organizational order.

This exchange shows how employees may produce competing interpretations and challenge managers with them, but how the manager may still have the last word and how the manager may use interpretative work to reinforce institutional order.

## **LEADERSHIP IS COMMUNICATION**

These interactionally produced and negotiated interpretations contribute to create local identities of the people involved and contribute to construct the manager as a locally situated interpreter and teacher. As the data show, the employees expect to have contexts interpreted, and they respect managers' interpretations. While employees may challenge interpretations and produce competing ones, they still accept correction and new information. They also accept having the topic closed, letting the manager have the last say.

The manager gets the right to perform interpretative management from his or her formal position, combined with his or her personal positioning (Fayol, 1916; French & Raven, 1959; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Kanter, 1979, 1983; Mintzberg, 1983; Russell, 1938; Weber, 1922/1946). Personal positioning is achieved interactionally; the formal position alone does not do it. The manager has to do interpreting and do convincing interpreting, because these interpretations can be challenged and countered by competitive interpretations.

Leadership can be defined as creating direction, framework, and meaning. The focus in this article has been on the latter. Interpreting the context and convincing the employees of the quality and relevance of the interpretations are necessary work to be able to convince them of the relevance of the created direction and framework. But in addition, interpreting the context constitutes the production of meaning. By doing interpretative management, the leaders are creating a context for the employees to maneuver in (Bateson, 1972; Björkegren, 1989; Goffman, 1955/1972; Kress, 1989; Schutz, 1967; Weick, 1979). Therefore, such little exchanges of situated interpretative management are practices of leadership.

Employees clearly expect to have their experiences interpreted, and they express this expectation to managers that they will exercise interpretative management (see Excerpts 3, 4 and 5). Smircich and Morgan (1982) have pointed out that the manager cannot function as a formal manager if his personal positioning does not give him access to performing interpretative management: "The leader exists as a formal leader only when he or she achieves a situation in which an obligation, expectation, or right



to frame experience is presumed, or offered and accepted by others” (p. 258). Formal leadership is defined to exist when there is a right or acknowledged right for some persons to define the reality of others (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, p. 258). This is not only the case when firing or employing people, assigning and delegating tasks, and so forth but also the case when succeeding in defining and framing the way to discuss and interpret such matters.

Leadership—even if not performed at executive level—is a social process of interaction with reality being defined in a way, which makes sense to the participants, and also a system of dependency, in which individuals entrust the power to interpret and define reality to others. Therefore, it could be claimed that the arrival of formal management roles represents yet another degree of institutionalization, where the right and the duty to define the nature of experiences and actions is recognized and formalized (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, p. 259). Such dependency was, for example, made very explicit in Excerpt 4.

I have shown that this ‘right and duty’ is achieved and maintained on a turn-by-turn basis by doing locally occasioned interpretative work, shaping locally situated experiences and actions or reports of experiences and actions, whether they be conflict management, delegation of tasks, firing employees, company expansion plans, or executive privileges.

Interpreting the tasks in relation to the context of the organization is indeed a matter of language acquisition: learning the vocabulary of the organization. Effective managers spend almost half of their time on so-called routine communication (Luthans, Hodgetts, & Rosenkrantz, 1988). Within organization studies, it is well established that “leadership is now commonly understood in terms of interaction, language, and persuasion” (Cheney, 1991, p.3). The actions and utterances of the manager create the frame and the context for action in such a way that employees within this context are able to use the meaning created as a point of reference for their own actions and understanding of situations (Smircich & Morgan, 1982, p. 261). The central challenge to a manager lies in the handling of meaning in such a way as to guide the employees toward the chosen goals. The use of language, rituals, drama, stories, myths, and symbolic constructions of every kind plays an important role in these endeavors (Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1982; Schultz, 1990; Schwartzman, 1989; Smircich, 1982; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Strategic leadership consists of establishing an idea of and a direction for organizational processes going beyond what is inherent in the organizational pattern of meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982,

p. 260). Like all social phenomena, leadership is socially constructed through interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Leadership has been defined as the active participation in a simultaneous goal defining, problem solving, and language creating cooperation with others of relevance (Johnsen, 1975).

In this article, I have demonstrated how leadership is constituted as an interactional practice and how the managers may show to be conscious of the interpretative process by articulating it (Excerpts 3 and 5).

### **MIDDLE MANAGERS DOING LEADERSHIP**

Middle managers and employees collaborate in interpreting the organizational tasks and events in relation to the context of the organization. Interlocutors cooperate dynamically in creating an understanding of reality on the basis of their experienced interaction with the world surrounding the organization, and this understanding forms a locally situated interpretative frame for members of the organization.

The role of middle managers is not strategy, but implementation of strategy; not to define the direction of the company but to translate it into something of relevance for a smaller unit of the company; not to choose direction and define organizational context but to interpret a chosen direction and defined context, inside and outside the organization, to have the employees perform in a matter that complies with the goals of top management. For executives, the aim is not to have too much lost in translation.

When competing interpretations occur, there are several possibilities. One is for the manager to present an interpretation, which is negotiated in the group and adjusted to reach a consensus of how to decode the situation (such as in Excerpts 3, 4 and 5). Another possibility is for the manager to present interpretations as *fait accompli* (like in Excerpt 6). But the manager's long-term interest is not in getting people to nod their heads and then act contrary to this, but to have the employees follow up on and implement decisions, which is obtained, for example, by reaching consensus, as this results in the employees having an interest in taking action accordingly. The acceptance is achieved in talk-in-interaction through explaining and arguing.

Not all employees are subjected to this kind of exchanges but might instead be assisting the manager in carrying them through. These are the older and/or more experienced employees (see Excerpt 2). It is interesting

how employees may choose to perform collaborative interpretative management. In the video recordings, some of the participants look bored when managers do interpretative work, and does not do much effort to hide it, perhaps because such learning has taken place a long time ago with these individuals.

Collaboration is not a matter of course. Employees sometimes produce competing interpretations and challenge managers with them (as shown in Excerpts 5 and 6). Differences in interpreting the organizational context can be reflected in focusing on key terms and the collaborative attribution of meaning to these key terms by interlocutors (Castor, 2007). Reconciling such differences might present a challenge to employees' solving work tasks (Palmeri, 2004). But orientation to mutual values may bridge other differences (Auer-Rizzi & Berry, 2000). Therefore, achieving a mutual understanding of and interpretation of the organizational context and how to navigate in it has an impact on organizational efficiency.

Being socialized into an organizational culture consists partly in organizational language acquisition. Different participants may attribute different meanings to similar terms, resulting in conflict and inefficiency (Bennington, Shetler, & Shaw, 2003). Thus, organizational culture is something to be acquired, while constructed and negotiated, and while at the same time providing the context for the construction and learning process. Middle managers such as department heads play a substantial role in securing the implementation of the executives' goals, strategies, and policies.

Interpretative management is not just practiced by managers. Any employee could do it, but not everybody does it. In my data, it is primarily practiced by managers but can also be practiced by senior employees. An important point is that interpretative management may be practiced as a joint sequential project. An employee may collaborate by showing expectation of the manager to produce interpretations, by accepting the manager to produce interpretations, and by collaborating in producing a sequential environment for the manager to produce interpretations. Such a sequential environment may be produced by inquiring about matters and presenting them as unresolved or contradictory or matters to be learned and understood, by producing understanding checks or by producing candidate interpretations, all social actions that make relevant a second pair part in which an interpretation or an evaluation of an interpretation is produced, followed by the production of a better and more authoritative interpretation.

The middle managers are central in these interactions. The middle manager may self-select to produce an interpretation of organizational practices,

procedures or processes, or may be addressed by employees orienting to having organizational practices, procedures, or processes interpreted.

Other employees can be doing the same sort of interpretative work, and doing interpretative management might be a way of positioning oneself as an informal leader. By producing convincing interpretations that succeed in contextualizing organizational action and propelling it forward, an employee can grow to be “someone to consult” on matters. This could explain why it seems so crucial for middle managers to meet challenges and to counter competitive interpretations: If the middle manager is no longer the central person in the department to consult on matters, the position is weakened, and it could be difficult for the manager to practice leadership.

In my data, I see the middle managers work in many ways to secure organizational outcome: implement strategy, translate from executive level to smaller subunit, create local relevance, interpret shifting contexts, interpret words and actions of executives, and promote organizational language acquisition, thus socializing new employees into organizational practices and perceptions. Much of this organizational work is done in oral communication, and it certainly appears in a certain kind of interaction—department meetings.

### **INTERPRETATIVE MANAGEMENT AS ANALYTICAL OBJECT**

Interpretative management is an analyst’s category, not a members’ category. We may not be able to show that interlocutors orient to interpretative management as what they are doing, as it may be possible when participants orient to social actions such as inquiring, inviting, or praising. They do not use the term, but they do orient to the activity being accomplished. Note how the employees in Excerpts 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 create sequential environments for the middle manager to produce an interpretation and how the middle managers never question the relevance of responding by producing an interpretation. Common traits of the shown excerpts are

- an employee producing a candidate understanding for the middle manager to confirm, reject, and re-solve leading to the middle manager producing a declarative doing interpreting something, or
- an employee testing or challenging something (the way to talk about something, the way to look at something, the organizational order, previous

middle manager interpretations) leading to the middle manager producing a declarative doing interpreting something.

Interpretative management is to be considered a leader action and part of leadership. Central to doing leadership is contextualizing employee actions (e.g., Excerpts 1 and 6) and central to doing leadership is also bringing employee perceptions in accordance with executive-level perceptions of organizational practices, procedures, or processes (this was done explicitly in Excerpts 2, 3, 4, 5 and implicitly in Excerpts 1 and 6). In some of the excerpts shown (Excerpts 1 and 6), the point is not just that the middle manager is doing interpretation but that the middle manager is *handling situations by doing interpretation*.

Leader actions are not only performed by leaders or managers but also may be social actions, which conventionally and as part of “text book leadership” are considered central to leadership (e.g., directing, rewarding and evaluating to achieve conflict management, team building, decision making, etc.). The concept “leader actions” will not be expanded on in this article but may be viewed along the lines of professional vision, defined by Charles Goodwin (1994, p. 606).

What is to be considered a leader action is dependent on the members’ collaborative construction of what is to be considered within the boundaries of relevant leader behavior for a leader acting as such. This discussion of leadership is in risk of circular argumentation, but the point is that leadership is continuously negotiated within an organization by employees and leaders interacting.

## **CONVERSATIONAL REPAIR AND INTERPRETATIVE MANAGEMENT**

There seems to be a relationship between interpretative management and conversational repair. Two kinds of repair are central to interpretative management: clarifications and self-repair. Note how an employee may produce a candidate understanding (Excerpts 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6), which is rejected by the middle manager and substituted by a better or more authoritative understanding, treated by the parties as such. Employees may be inviting the middle manager to perform other repair, and both employees and middle managers may self-repair to (not correct errors or facilitate comprehension but to) get it right.

Repair is also central to interpretative management since sequential environments making repair relevant appear, and sequential environments appear, making leader action intervention relevant and making relevant

that this action is performed as repair. See for example, Excerpts 1, 5 and 6, where employees may be testing limits of organizational behavior, challenging the organizational order or challenging the middle manager himself. In such environments the middle manager will need to be interfering, doing conflict management, telling people off, meeting the challenge, and so forth unless he or she will accept their behavior (and by that, establish it as acceptable) or construct himself as indifferent, negligent, or weak. No response from the manager would have been noticeably absent and have consequences and create precedent.

Perhaps this apparent link between repair and interpretative management is because of the fact that the everyday and taken-for-granted aspects of daily life often are only made visible to the researcher when the rules and routines through which they are produced are broken or breeched in some way (Garfinkel, 1967). Repair is not inherent to interpretative management, but makes it more overt.

Other sequential environments may be

- middle manager reporting from leader meetings, quarterly financial statements, financial forecasts, CEO presentations, and so forth leading to the middle manager interpreting the implications of these discussions, messages, statements or forecasts (not shown in this article),
- employee requesting information from middle manager leading to the middle manager producing declaratives, accounts etc. doing interpretation (not shown in this article); and
- employee doing reporting leading to employee or middle manager interpreting the implications of the report (not shown in this article).

## **PRACTICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

What I have dealt with is only a small aspect of management, and department meetings are only a minor part of a middle manager's work. Studying so-called routine communication is vital for understanding organizational practices. Studying organizations begin with studying the interaction of the members. This is where and how socialization of new employees takes place: by repair of word choice and by interpreting the context to navigate in. Socialization is locally situated in a wealth of small exchanges.

That socialization, learning and meaning production is part of leadership, is well established within the literature of sociology and organizational communication. My contribution has not been to yet again assert this as a fact, but to discuss *how* these abstract phenomena are constituted as interactional practices.

Organizational culture is interactionally constructed and reconstructed everyday on a local level in the interactions between organizational members. From the point of selecting values to implement and having the employees in general live the values a lot of interpretation management has to take place. My study emphasizes the important role of the middle manager in this process.

Leadership is communication. It is therefore crucial to carry out organizational analysis involving but not necessarily limiting it to conversation analysis. If the interactional aspect of social conduct in the workplace is not taken into account, many important points will be missed.

## APPENDIX

### Transcript Notation

SYMBOL	EXPLANATION	MEANING
,	comma	global intonation is continuing
.	period after word or syllable	global intonation is final
?	question mark	global intonation is rising
¿	adverse question mark	global intonation is slightly rising
<u>meaning</u>	underlining	stress
:	colon	stretched sound
↑	upward arrow	upward local intonation movement,
↓	downward arrow	pitch reset from low downward local intonation movement
(.)	period in brackets	micropause, less than 0.2 seconds
(0.7)	number in brackets	pause, measured in seconds
» meaning «		talking fast
[		overlapping talk begins
]		overlapping talk ends
˘meaning˘		smile voice
-	dash	cutoff
.h	period before h	inbreath
h		outbreath
(h)	h in brackets	explosive outbreath, as when laughing
°meaning°		low volume
°°meaning°°		very low volume
MEANING		high volume
=		the turn or turn constructional unit is latched on prior turn/turn constructional unit



## REFERENCES

- Antaki, C. (1994). *Explaining and arguing. The social organization of accounts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Asmuß, B. (2006, May). *Employee performance appraisals: Assessing the employee*. Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, BI Norwegian School of Management, Oslo.
- Asmuß, B. (2007, May 23-26). *Identity construction and leadership in job appraisal interviews*. Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, University of Yeditepe, Istanbul.
- Asmuß, B. (2008, April 3-5). *Story sequences in meeting talk: Identity construction and employee relations*. Paper presented in themed panel, Forms of Social Organization in Meeting Talk, at Sociolinguistics Symposium 17, Micro and Macro Connections, Amsterdam.
- Auer-Rizzi, W., & Berry, M. (2000). Business vs. cultural frames of reference in group decision making: Interactions among Austrian, Finnish, and Swedish business students. *Journal of Business Communication, 37*(3), 264-292.
- Batson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Bennington, A., Shetler, J., & Shaw, T. (2003). Negotiating order in interorganizational communication: Discourse analysis of a meeting of three diverse organizations. *Journal of Business Communication, 40*(2), 118-143.
- Berger, P., & Luckman, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.
- Björkegren, D. (1989). *Hur organisationer lär* [How organizations learn]. Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur.
- Boden, D. (1994). *The business of talk. Organizations in action*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Castor, T. (2007). Language use during school board meetings: Understanding controversies of and about communication. *Journal of Business Communication, 44*(2), 111-136.
- Cheney, G. (1991). *Rhetoric in an organizational society. Managing multiple identities*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Clifton, J. (2006a). A conversation analytical approach to business communication: The case of leadership. *Journal of Business Communication, 43*(3), 202-219.
- Clifton, J. (2006b, May). *What can conversation analysis offer business practitioners and business communication trainers?* Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, BI Norwegian School of Management, Oslo.
- Fayol, H. (1949). General principles of management. In C. Storrs (Trans.), *General and industrial management* (chap. 4, pp. 253-274). London: Pitman Publishing. (Original work published 1916)
- Ford, C. (2008a). *Women speaking up: Getting and using turns in meetings*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ford, C. (2008b, April 3-5). *The turn as a site for micro and macro structuring in a workplace meeting*. Paper presented in themed panel, Forms of Social Organization in Meeting Talk, at Sociolinguistics Symposium 17, Micro and Macro Connections, Amsterdam.
- Ford, C. (in press). Questioning in meetings: Participation and positioning. In A. Freed & S. Ehrlich (Eds.), *"Why do you ask?": The function of questions in institutional discourse*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.



- French, J. R. P., Jr., & Bertram, R. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. P. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 317-328). Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan Press.
- Galbraith, J. R. (1974). Organization design: An information processing view. *Interfaces*, 4(3), 28-36.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1955). On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. *Psychiatry*, 28, 213-231.
- Goodwin, C. (1994). Professional vision. *American Anthropologist*, 96(3), 606-633.
- Jefferson, G. (1974). Error correction as an interactional resource. *Language in Society*, 2, 181-199.
- Jefferson, G. (1987). On exposed and embedded correction in conversation. In G. Button & J. R. E. Lee (Eds.), *Talk and social organization* (pp. 86-100). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Johnsen, E. (1975). *Teorien om ledelse: introduktion til ledelseslære* [The theory of leadership: Introduction to leadership teachings]. København: Nyt Nordisk Forlag.
- Kangasharju, H. (1998). *Alignment in disagreement: Building alliances in multiperson interaction*. Unpublished dissertation, Department of Finnish Language, University of Helsinki, Helsinki.
- Kangasharju, H. (2006). *Emotional aspects of managerial talk in multinational meetings*. Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, BI Norwegian School of Management, Oslo.
- Kangasharju, H. (2007, May 23-26). *Democratic decision-making in workplace meetings—or not?* Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, University of Yeditepe, Istanbul.
- Kangasharju, H. (2008, April 3-5). *Decision making in workplace meetings*. Paper presented in themed panel, Forms of Social Organization in Meeting Talk, at Sociolinguistics Symposium 17, Micro and Macro Connections, Amsterdam.
- Kanter, R. M. (1979). Power failure in management circuits. *Harvard Business Review*, 57(4), pp. 319-338.
- Kanter, R. M. (1983). *The change masters*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kress, G. (1989). *Linguistic processes in sociocultural practice*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Lawrence, P. R., & Lorsch, J. W. (1967). High-performing organizations in three environments. In *Organizations and environments* (chap. 6). Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Luthans, F., Hodgetts, R. M., & Rosenkrantz, S. A. (1988). *Real managers*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
- Mazeland, H. (2006, May). *Quoting in meetings*. Paper presented at International Conference on Conversation Analysis, University of Helsinki.
- Mazeland, H. (2008, April 3-5). *Quoting in meetings*. Paper presented in themed panel, Forms of Social Organization in Meeting Talk, at Sociolinguistics Symposium 17, Micro and Macro Connections, Amsterdam.
- Mintzberg, H. (1983). *Power in and around organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- Nielsen, M. F. (1999, May). *Doing being a leader*. Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, Helsinki School of Business.
- Nielsen, M. F. (2007a, May 17-19). *Corrections in organizational settings*. Paper presented at The Thirteenth Annual Conference on Language, Interaction, and Social Organization (LISO), University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Nielsen, M. F. (2007b, May 23-26). *The middle manager constructing himself as the boss*. Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, University of Yeditepe, Istanbul.
- Nielsen, M. F. (2008, April 3-5). *Constructing leadership in meetings*. Paper presented in themed panel, Forms of Social Organization in Meeting Talk, at Sociolinguistics Symposium 17, Micro and Macro Connections, Amsterdam.
- Nikko, T. (2006). *Across the shiny table: Dynamic dialogue in international management meetings*. Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, BI Norwegian School of Management, Oslo.
- Nikko, T. (2007, May 23-26). *Managers promoting dialogue*. Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, University of Yeditepe, Istanbul.
- Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge-creating company: How Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Palmeri, J. (2004). When discourses collide: A case study of interprofessional collaborative writing in a medically oriented law firm. *Journal of Business Communication*, 41(1), 37-65.
- Pfeffer, J. (1981). *Power in organizations*. Marshfield, MA: Pitman Publishing.
- Pomerantz, A. (1984). Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action. Studies in conversation analysis, studies in emotion and social interaction* (pp. 57-101). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Pondy, L. R., Frost, P., Morgan, G., & Dandridge, T. (Eds.). (1982). *Organizational symbolism*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Russell, B. (1938). *Power: A new social analysis*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1988). On an actual virtual servo-mechanism for guessing bad news: A single case conjecture. *Social Problems*, 35(4), 442-457.
- Schegloff, E., Jefferson, G., & Sacks, H. (1977). The preference for self-correction in the organization of repair for conversation. *Language*, 53, 361-382.
- Schein, E. H. (1985). *Organizational culture and leadership. A dynamic view*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schwartzman, H. (1989). *The meeting. Gatherings in organizations and communities*. New York & London: Plenum Press.
- Schultz, M. (1990). *Kultur i organisationer. Funktion eller symbol* [Culture in organizations. Function or symbol]. København: Handelsøjskolens Forlag.
- Schutz, A. (1967). *Collected papers I: The problem of social reality* (2nd ed.). The Hague, the Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). The leader's new work: Building learning organizations. *Sloan Management Review*, 32(1), 486-514.
- Simon, H. A. (1946). The proverbs of administration. *Public Administration Review*, 6, 112-124.
- Smircich, L. (1982). Organizations as shared meanings. In L. R. P. Pondy et al. (Eds.), *Organizational symbolism* (pp. 55-65). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

- Smircich, L., & Morgan, G. (1982). Leadership: The management of meaning. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 18(3), 257-273.
- Svennevig, J. (2006). *Managers' reformulation practices in international management meetings*. Paper presented at Association for Business Communication, ABC Europe, BI Norwegian School of Management, Oslo.
- Svennevig, J. (2008, April 3-5). *Assigning work responsibilities in meetings*. Paper presented in themed panel, Forms of Social Organization in Meeting Talk, at Sociolinguistics Symposium 17, Micro and Macro Connections, Amsterdam.
- Stohl, C. (1986). The role of memorable messages in the process of organizational socialization. *Communication Quarterly*, 34(3), 231-249.
- Weber, M. (1922). *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie* [Economy and society: An outline of interpretative sociology]. In H. H. Gerth & C. W. Mills (Eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology* (Part III, chap. 6, pp. 650-78). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weick, K. E. (1979). *The social psychology of organization*. New York: Random House.