

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Lehtinen, Esa; Pälli, Pekka

**Title:** On the participatory agency of texts : using institutional forms in performance appraisal interviews

**Year:** 2021

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © 2020 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston.

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Lehtinen, E., & Pälli, P. (2021). On the participatory agency of texts : using institutional forms in performance appraisal interviews. *Text and Talk*, 41(1), 47-69. <https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2019-0121>

Esa Lehtinen\* and Pekka Pälli

# On the participatory agency of texts: Using institutional forms in performance appraisal interviews

<https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2019-0121>

**Abstract:** Drawing on studies of the performative effects and agency of texts in organizations, the paper investigates how the agency of texts figures through their participatory status in interaction. The empirical data for the study consist of video-recorded performance appraisal interviews in a Finnish public organization in which the interaction relies heavily on an appraisal form. The data are analyzed through a sequential analysis that draws on multimodal conversation analysis and ethnographic knowledge. The analysis shows that the human participants orient to three different acts that are inscribed in the textual document: 1) presenting demands for the participants; 2) offering topics for the discussion as well as perspectives from which those topics should be discussed; and 3) suggesting conventional ways of progressing in the interaction. Furthermore, the material and the semiotic facets of textual documents are shown to be systematically related in that specific orientations to the material aspect of the paper form entail specific orientations to the semiotic content. The study sheds light on the subtle ways through which the distributed, albeit dissymmetric, agency of human and non-human participants is constructed, and on how texts are treated as more or less authoritative in face-to-face interaction.

**Keywords:** conversation, interaction, organizational texts, textual agency, performance appraisal interviews

## 1 Introduction

Written documents are essential components of various organizational practices. From the standpoint of interaction, they have an important dual quality in that they are both semiotic and material. Their semiotic quality means

---

\*Corresponding author: Esa Lehtinen, Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, 40014, Jyväskylä, Finland, E-mail: esa.t.lehtinen@jyu.fi. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0218-6075>

Pekka Pälli, Department of Management Studies, Aalto University, P.O. Box 11000, 00076, Aalto, Finland, E-mail: pekka.palli@aalto.fi. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0287-8813>

that they include meaningful textual content that can be, for instance, read or referred to during interaction. Materiality, on the other hand, means that they are visible, tangible and movable. They can be gazed at, pointed at, and manipulated.

Earlier research has shown how written documents are used in systematic ways in numerous kinds of workplace encounters and how, importantly, both the semiotic and the material quality of the documents matter in these activities. A case in point is the use of the written agenda to accomplish topic shifts in meetings. As Svennevig (2012) shows, the chair often announces a new agenda item through citing a title in the agenda. Simultaneously, she or he often directs her or his gaze towards the material paper document. The appraisal form in the performance appraisal interview can be used in a similar way (Mikkola and Lehtinen 2014): in topic shifts the items in the appraisal form are referred to verbally, and the material document is gazed at and manipulated in various ways. Also, as Glenn and LeBaron (2011) have shown for the case of recruitment interviews, the semiotic and material nature of a document can be used to draw attention to knowledge contained in the document. Finally, Karlsson's (2009) and Nielsen's (2012) studies show how movable notes or colored cards can be used as both semiotic and material resources in organizing and discussing ideas in meetings or brainstorming sessions.

Our study extends the work done in previous studies in that we also look at how a written document is used systematically in a particular workplace activity. In particular, however, our aim is to draw attention to how the role of the document can be conceptualized. While earlier research has concentrated on how the human participants of the interactional encounter use the document, we in this paper ask whether the document can also be seen as an active "participant" in the interaction. In doing this, we draw on studies of the performative effects and agency of texts in organizations, applying and developing further, in particular, the so-called CCO (communicative constitution of organizations) research approach's central idea of (also) inanimate "things" exercising agency in organization and in interaction (Ashcraft et al. 2009; Cooren 2004; Cooren and Matte 2010; Cooren 2015; Pälli 2018). This theoretical stance stems from the sociomaterial view of agency, which emphasizes the ontological inseparability of the social and the material (Barad 2007). The approach does not attach agency to pre-existing categories but views it through the notion of constitutive entanglement: agency is enacted in practice and in real doings which bring together the social and the material in an inseparable way. In our case of textual documents, this means that their

materiality becomes entangled with the humans that they, to borrow Barad's (2007) term, "intra-act" with in the actual practice. Thus, their material agency is not devoid of human agency, but instead constitutively entangled with it.

In accord with the definition of organizational texts as documents, templates, or other written artefacts that are created and used in the context of organizing (Fayard and Metiu 2012), we will in this article examine how one specific organizational text, an appraisal form document, is constitutively entangled with the human participants in a specific context of performance appraisal interviews, that is, manager-employee face-to-face encounters that are part of regular employee performance and development reviews in most organizations. They have twofold aims: to evaluate the performance of the employee and to set goals for the next evaluation period. Usually they are based on an appraisal form.

Our focus in this paper is on a specific kind of activity in the appraisal interview: we look at the initial parts of the interviews, in which the manager and the employee, in the organization under study, go through their written entries in the appraisal forms of earlier years, in order to assess the long term development of the employee. This phase of the appraisal interview is interesting for our purposes, firstly, in that the document is particularly prominent in the activity at hand, and secondly, in that the document the manager has in his hands transcends two points in time: the moment in history when the earlier performance appraisal interview was held, and the present interactional moment when the form is referred to and read.

Our analysis in this paper will highlight how the 'staying power' of a particular text, the appraisal form, is actualized in the interactional context of the performance appraisal interview. We will show how a document, an organizational text, constructed in another time and place enters into and has an effect in the sequential action in the encounter and becomes agentive. Empirically, we will answer the following research questions: 1) In what ways does the conventionalized organizational document participate in the interactional encounter?; and 2) how do the human participants of the interaction display their orientation to the participation of the document?

In the next section, we will review relevant literature on performativity and agency of texts in organizations. Specifically, we zoom in on the agentivity of texts, particularly drawing on the CCO approach's theoretical ideas of agentivity and text-conversation dialectics in organizations. Then we will present our data and methods, followed by the analysis of the data. Finally, in the discussion and conclusions section, we will spell out the contribution of our study with regard to earlier literature.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Performativity of texts in organizations

Research on texts and writing has long acknowledged the performativity of texts and writing practice. Indeed, studies on the evolution of writing have demonstrated how the historical advances in writing as well as the production of – and technologies of producing – textual documents and archives have had significant effects as regards the development of new societal forms (Goody 1986; Ong 1986). A crucially important factor in this is the texts' capacity to transcend the boundaries of time and space and expand cognition. Due to their material form and capacities, texts (and those who produced them) can, for example, act from a distance (Putnam and Cooren 2004) or work as cognitive 'aids' that extend the cognitive capacity of the brain to store or process information (Clark 2008).

It is exactly the texts' capacity to expand cognition and to remain (Putnam and Cooren 2004), that forms the crux of the importance of texts in organizations – and for organizing. Because of these capacities, texts can work as an institutional memory and liable record of documentation (McPhee and Poole 2001; Sarangi and Brookes-Howell 2006). Importantly, permanence and liability are connected to written texts' capacity of 'fixing meanings' (Karlsson 2009) and transient ideas so that they become organizationally unanimous, formalized, actionable, and structured (Anderson 2004).

Recently, empirical contributions to research on organizational texts have shown how organizational texts are performative in the sense that they, for example, affect strategic decisions and organizational strategy work in general (Pälli et al. 2009) and give order and disorder to project-based organizing (Vásquez et al. 2016). Also, research has highlighted the importance and power of written documents from the point of view of what happens in situated interaction. For example, Samra-Fredericks (2005) shows how a company policy document figures in interaction so that it limits the action possibilities of the interactants. Other research has evidenced the significance of writing devices and the practice of writing for the situated activity in organizational practices. For example, Nissi (2015) demonstrates how the facilitator's access to the computer has an effect on how a statement is produced jointly in an organizational meeting. Finally, Pälli and Lehtinen (2014) highlight the importance of writing practice in terms of agreeing on common goals in manager–employee interaction in performance appraisal interviews.

To summarize thus far, we can argue that organizational texts are important building blocks in many organizational practices where they work in tandem with

the face-to-face interaction of organizational members. In their organizational encounters, people, in other words, draw on and rely on organizational texts, which, for their part, appear to be important and in many cases even elementary parts of wider organizational practice.

## 2.2 Towards a view of texts as actors and agents

Most existing research has focused on the role of texts in terms of how people use them in interaction. Adopting a different perspective, a recent stream of research emanating from the burgeoning field of studies within the communicative constitution of organizations perspective (hereafter CCO, see, Ashcraft et al. 2009; Cooren et al. 2011) has challenged the common approach by advocating a view where texts are seen as actors and agents in their own right. This view is founded on the Montreal school of organizational communication's conception of the conversation-text relation (Kuhn 2008; Taylor and van Every 2000) and material-textual agency in organizations (Cooren 2004, Cooren et al. 2011).

For the CCO scholars, the conversation-text dialectic means the recursive and iterative dynamic process through which organizing is accomplished and through which the characteristic features of organization, such as its practices or authority relations emerge (Cooren et al. 2011; Taylor and van Every 2000). Put simply, conversations (as situated events of language-use) produce texts (as semiotic, oral or written artefacts which have durability) which again work as substances upon and through which the conversations form. Over the course of multiple iterations in this self-organizing loop, some texts may become abstracted representations and assume the status of 'authoritative text' – meaning that these texts become distanced from specific conversations and that they become shared and recognized, albeit contested, in organizations (Kuhn 2008). Empirical studies building on and extending the notion of 'authoritative text' have shown, for example, how a strategic plan document assumes the status of authoritative text in the iterative talk to text cycles (Spee and Jarzabkowski 2011), how even a specific term can become an authoritative text (Koschmann 2013), or how organizational rituals represent authoritative texts that convey power and legitimacy (Koschmann and McDonald 2015). What is important here is that 'authoritativeness' is theorized as being connected to agency – not, however, to agency equivalent to human intention but agency of material objects, artefacts, and tools.

More generally, apart from the specific notion of authoritative text, the CCO approach emphasizes that "who or what is acting always is an open question" (Cooren et al. 2011: 1152). This view takes seriously the point made forcefully by the actor-network theorist Bruno Latour. For Latour, "any thing that does modify a

state of affairs by making a difference is an actor” (Latour 2005: 71), so all entities – be they human, animate or just material – that are “participants in the course of action” (Latour 2005: 71) are seen as capable of having agency. As Latour (2005: 72) continues, also material objects “authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on”. Of course, human actants are involved in these actions, as the material objects’ agency is always agency with human actants with whom they intra-act (cf. Barad 2007). Thus, the specific textual agency of textual artefacts is based on the fact that they are produced by people. As Cooren (2008: 11–12) explains, this is precisely the reason why people can orient to these texts by ascribing them agency.

In a hallmark paper that introduces the notion of textual agency and connects it to pragmatics of language, Cooren (2004) demonstrates the material-textual agency of texts on organizations, and for organizing. Drawing on speech act theory, he shows how organizational texts perform, or are represented as performing and being able to perform, particular types of illocutionary acts. Building from these ideas, some individual case studies have concentrated on specific material-textual devices such as a ‘measuring stick’ (Cooren and Matte 2010) or a table drawn on a blackboard (Cooren and Bencherki 2010): Cooren and Matte (2010) show how a ‘measuring stick’ used by a humanitarian organization had agency as it *could decide* whether children were entitled to health services, and Cooren and Bencherki (2010) demonstrate how a table drawn on a blackboard exercised agency as it *could reveal* trends in a child’s sickness.

Our study presents a case of actualization of the ‘staying power’ of a particular text, the appraisal form, in the interactional context of the performance appraisal interview. In particular, our analysis demonstrates how a document, an organizational text, constructed in another time and place enters into and has an effect in the sequential action in the encounter and becomes agentive.

### 3 Data and method

The data for the study consist of six video-recorded dyadic performance appraisal interviews in a Finnish city organization. The manager in all of the appraisal interviews is the director of early learning services in the city. There are six different employees who are leaders of different early learning units, e.g., kindergartens and crèches. The interviews last about an hour<sup>1</sup>. The data was transcribed using a simplified version of conversation analytic conventions (see e.g., Hepburn and Bolden 2012). We also marked relevant non-verbal activities in the transcript,

---

<sup>1</sup> Written informed consent for the use of the data has been acquired from all participants.

particularly those having to do with manipulating the written document (see Appendix 1 for transcription conventions). The video-recordings were used in all stages of data analysis.

The performance appraisal interviews in our data follow a fairly routine structure. In the first part of the encounter the participants go through the performance appraisal interviews of earlier years with the help of the appraisal forms of earlier years. Secondly, they discuss the budget of the employee's unit. Thirdly, the main part of the interview comprises of evaluation of the employee's performance as well as setting goals for the coming year. The first and third parts follow the structure of the appraisal form, which has the following sections: 'professional competence', 'productivity', 'capability to co-operate' and 'capability to develop'. It is relevant for our analysis that the form has three pages. The first section, 'professional competence', is on the first page. 'Productivity' and 'capability to co-operate' are on the second page, while the last section is on the third page. In each section there are, firstly, more exact evaluation criteria under the title of the section. Secondly, at the bottom of the section there is a field entitled 'agreed goals'. The title implies that the participants should enter the goals for future development in this field. In reality, however, both evaluations of past performance and future goals are recorded in the field. The structure of the form entries thus follows a routine where the strengths of the employee's past performance are recorded first and then the development targets. Importantly, for our analysis, the exact same form has been used for several years in the organization.

In our analysis, we connect textual agency to interactional patterns in the appraisal interview. Our way of approaching interaction incorporates ideas from ethnomethodological conversation analysis (see e.g., Schegloff 2007). In particular, we look at contributions in interaction as part of their sequential context, and we use the concept of adjacency pair (see, Schegloff and Sacks 1973), that is, a pair of actions where the first pair part creates a normative expectation for a particular kind of second pair part in the next turn of talk (e.g., question and answer). Also, following the workplace studies approach (Heath and Luff 2000) and the subsequent conversation analytical approaches on multimodal interaction (e.g., Deppermann 2013), we see interaction as fundamentally embodied. That is, resources for action include talk, the body, the material surroundings as well as different material objects. Accordingly, our transcripts include both talk and relevant embodied features. At the same time, however, our approach differs from conversation analysis. While, in conversation analysis, documents and other objects are seen as resources for the actions of the human participants (see e.g., Neville et al. 2014), we also, in accordance with our theoretical approach, look at how they can be seen as participants themselves. As suggested by Suchman (2007), we try to conduct an analysis that, at the same time, is open for the



possibility of distributed agency that is not restricted to humans and acknowledges the asymmetries between human and non-human agencies. In doing this, we conduct a sequential analysis that aims at uncovering the orientations of the human participants, but we also supplement it with ethnographic knowledge of the role of the document in the organization.

Our analysis is based on a collection of cases of a particular sequence type. The sequence type we concentrate on is the recollection summary of the past that occurs in the beginning stage of the interview. Within these sequences, the manager and the employee go through the written entries they have written down in earlier years' interviews as regards the employee's performance and development goals. This activity is initiated and led by the manager.

The activity is fundamentally built of a series of readings by the manager. That is, he reads out loud the evaluations and goals that have been recorded in a specific section of the previous year's appraisal form. After this he may proceed in two alternative ways: either he asks a question with regard to the issues mentioned in the form or he just raises his gaze and gives the employee a possibility to comment on the issues. In the latter case the employee may respond just with a continuer such as *mm* or *joo* 'yeah' or with a more extended comment. These comments rarely lead to lengthy discussions. As we will show later, the participants – particularly the manager – display an orientation to proceeding fairly quickly from one item to the next.

In the following, we will concentrate on the sequences where, after the reading, the manager asks a question. For our purposes, these are more interesting than the others in that they always include an adjacency pair where a certain type of response, an answer, is expected from the employee. In the dataset, we have identified three different ways the document participates in the interaction in these sequences, i.e., three ways that it has an effect on what happens. Thus, we will argue that the following three acts are inscribed in the document: demands to the human participants, offering topics and perspectives, and suggesting ways of progressing in the interactional encounter. In the following analysis we will show how these acts and their import for interaction are oriented to by the human participants. Our extracts exemplify instances of typical, recurrent patterns in the data.

## 4 Analysis

In the following, we will exemplify the results of our analysis with three extracts. Firstly, with the help of extract 1, we will look at how the demands of the document are oriented to. This aspect of the document has to do with the part of the document

where the manager has written his entries in the empty fields of the document during the appraisal interviews of earlier years. We will concentrate here on the document as a semiotic entity, i.e., the fact that it includes textual content.

The employee in extract 1 is the manager of a kindergarten that specializes in shift care, offered for the children whose parents are (or parent is) in shift work. The manager has the appraisal form in his hand, and it is open on the second page of the document that includes two sections, with the titles *tuloksellisuus* ‘productivity’ and *yhteistyökyky* ‘capability to co-operate’. In addition, a relevant detail in the form will turn out to be that the first item under the title ‘capability to co-operate’ is formulated as *vuorovaikutustaidot* ‘interaction skills’. The participants have just finished talking about ‘productivity’, and now they turn to the topic of co-operation. The manager is looking at the document, while the employee is looking at the manager. In all of the extracts we have marked the manager as M and the employee as E.

#### Extract 1

- M has document in his hand; M->doc; E->M**
- 01 M: no sit vuorovaikutuspuolel puhuttiin siit et  
well then on the interaction side we talked that
- {M grabs a page**
- 02 vuorovaikutuksen lisääminen {johtajatasolla,  
increasing interaction on the leader level,
- {M->E**
- 03 mut{ta tota (.) eiks teil nyt oo=oot  
but uhm (.) don't you now have=have
- {M turns page**
- 04 sä osallistun niihin {(0.8) kotiryhmiin  
you taken part in the (0.8) home groups
- {E->up**
- 05 mi[ {tä siel on, et on[ks ne o[llu,  
wh[ich there are, ha[ve they b[een,
- [ [ [
- 06 E: [ {oon, [joo, [ >ja ne  
[yes, [yeah, [ >and they
- 07 on ollu must siis< iha hyvä.  
Have been I think y'know< pretty good.

In extract 1, the manager observably reads the entry in the form. There are several features that point to the reading. First, the reading is introduced with *puhuttiin siit et* ‘we talked that’ (line 1). The verb *puhua* ‘talk’ is repeatedly used in the sequence

in question. Taken literally, it displays that the manager is going to quote the participants' discussion from an earlier appraisal interview. However, after this introduction he does not produce the expected syntactic continuation which, in Finnish, would be a subordinate clause. What he, however, produces is a nominal construction *vuorovaikutuksen lisääminen johtajatasolla* 'increasing interaction on the leader level' (line 2). This construction does not fit the syntax of the turn so far; instead, it reads well as an item written in the 'agreed goals' field of the form. As another contextualization cue, the manager uses the so-called reading voice (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2005; Nissi 2015), and his gaze is towards the document during the reading.

Importantly, also, the participants display that they see the form entry as having continued relevance. This can be seen in the question-answer adjacency pair (lines 3–7) that follows the reading. The manager's question (lines 3–5) is a bit vague since it includes two restarts, and it is not syntactically complete in its final form. However, the manager ends up asking the employee his view of the usefulness of 'home groups' that have been organized in the organization. 'Home groups' refer to groups of leaders of different units in the same area of the city that have met more or less regularly to discuss their work and share collegial support. The *mutta* 'but' in the beginning of the question implies some kind of a contrast. In this case, the question suggests a change with regard to the problem that has been referred to before the question. Thus, the 'home groups' are presented as a potential solution to the issue of 'increasing interaction on the leader level'. This is the way the employee also interprets it: he evaluates the usefulness of the home groups (lines 6–7). Thus, both participants orient to the issue recorded in the form entry, 'increasing interaction on the leader level', as a problem that should have been dealt with.

If we look at the extract from the perspective of the human participants alone, we can say that the participants use the textual content of the document in their negotiation of whether they have or have not achieved the goals of the previous year. However, we believe more can be said about the role of the text. The goals are written down in the text, and the text exists in a fixed form, in the sheet of paper in the hands of the participants. It has been written down by the (same) manager in the earlier appraisal interview, and thus it is a carrier of the spoken agreement from that earlier moment in time. But the fixed form that makes it possible for it to be a carrier, also makes it independent of the earlier face-to-face encounter. The spoken interaction between the participants cannot be recalled in any definitive way, but the text that is a result of the spoken interaction, can be read in its exact form. Thus, we can say that it is an independent participant and an agent, in that the demand that the participants are accountable for is inscribed in the text. It is noteworthy, in our view, that the participants clearly take the demand for granted, as they do not explicate its relevance. Rather, they move straight from reading the demand to dealing with it.

Secondly, we will show how offering topics and perspectives for the interaction is inscribed in the document. This can also be seen in extract 1, in how the participants display their orientation to the body text of the form. In the beginning of his turn, the manager contextualizes the issue with *vuorovaikutuspuolel* ‘on the interaction side’. This expression refers to the item *vuorovaikutustaidot* ‘interaction skills’ under the title ‘capability to co-operate’. The sentence structure shows that the issue of ‘interaction side’ is presented as a known issue, a routine taken-for-granted topic at this point. At the same time, however, the topic in the form is not repeated verbatim. First of all, the manager chooses ‘interaction side’ instead of the main title ‘capability to co-operate’, and reformulates the expression in the form – *vuorovaikutustaidot* ‘interaction skills’ – into ‘interaction side’. Thus, on the one hand, the form is agentive; it contains a suggestion for the order of topics that is fixed and independent of the particular participants. On the other hand, it is the human participants who formulate the topics in situ in each particular instance.

In extract 2, we can see further ways the document participates in offering topics and perspectives. The employee is the director of the so-called ‘family day care’, which is a form of care provided in the educators’ own homes. In the extract, the participants turn their attention to whether and how the employee conducts ‘home visits’, that is, visits to the homes of carers where they do their work.

#### Extract 2

**M holds document in his hand in an erect position;  
M->doc; E has document on the table on her left;  
E->M;**

- 01 M: sit tosiaan vuos sitte (0.2) helmikuussa kun  
then indeed a year ago (0.2) in February when  
02 käytiin niin, (.) sillo oli yheksäntoist  
we conducted, (.) then there were nineteen  
03 kotona olevaa kaks varahoitajaa yks  
who were at home two substitute care takers one

#### fig 1

- 04 ryhmis ja, (1.7) tiimimalli työimii ja  
group daycare and, (1.7) the team model works and

**{E->doc}**

- 05 sit tavoitteena (.) tavoitteena oli tää  
then as a goal (.) as a goal was this

- 06 kotikäyntien säännöllisyys ja  
regularity of home visits and
- 07 vasujen konkretisointi  
concretization of ELPs,
- {E->M}                      {M->E}
- 08 ni{in, (.) sitä tos sanoit{ki [jo  
(.) what you said there [already was  
[
- 09 E: [mm,
- {E->doc}                      {M->doc}
- 10 M: että k[äy{mään sit py{rit [edelleen,  
that you t[ry then to visit [still,  
[
- 11 E: [jo{o, [.joo,  
[yeah, [.yeah,
- 12 (.)
- 13 E: joo. (.) kyllä.=että sitä (.) sitä lisäämään että,  
yeah. (.) yes.=to (.) to increase that,

In extract 2, the manager contextualizes the issue with the expression *vuos sitte* ‘a year ago’ (line 1). Thus, he refers to the year of the appraisal. The date of the appraisal is printed in the very beginning of the form. This is thus a reference to the textual content of the form, as well as to the institutional requirement of holding appraisals every year.

Furthermore, after providing a context with regard to the number of subordinates the employee has (lines 2–3), he reads two kinds of things from the document. First he reads an evaluation of the employee: ‘the team model works’ (line 4), then he turns to ‘goals’ (lines 4–7). This kind of a distinction is made recurrently by the manager. Clearly, it is a central distinction in the body text of the form. The text is loaded with evaluation discourse. The title of the document is *Henkilön työsuorituksen arviointi* ‘Evaluation of a person’s work performance’, and the different items in the document are titled *arviointitekijät* ‘evaluation criteria’. On the other hand, as discussed earlier, the field where the manager has written is titled *Sovitut tavoitteet* ‘Agreed goals’. Thus, the manager shows that he sees the entries he has written through the lense of the institutional tasks that are accentuated in the text, those of evaluating and setting development goals.

Thus, the form as an institutional text and as an organizational actor is persistent; it can transcend time and space. It contains directions as to how

appraisal should be practiced in the organization with regard to the yearly actualization of the practice, its topical structure, and the perspectives to be taken up. In that sense, the concrete text as an agent can also stand for a more abstract 'text', which Kuhn (2008) calls the 'authoritative text', that is, a more or less canonical understanding of what it means to be part of this particular organization. The appraisal form is, after all, an institutional text that has been taken into use at the organizational level and its form has remained the same for several years. It is a carrier of organizational authority.

At the same time, however, we want to stress that the enactment of the authoritative text is an achievement of the human participants of the particular appraisal interview. It is the human participants who conduct their activities in accordance with the structure and categories offered by the text, and, in doing so, reinterpret and recontextualize the text and the directions inscribed in it.

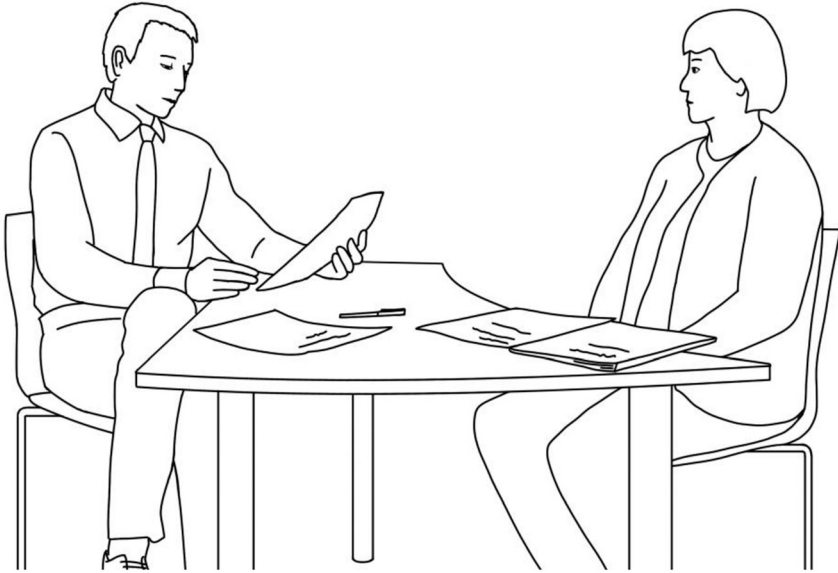
Thus far, we have shown how the document as a semiotic entity participates in presenting demands and offering topics and perspectives to be dealt with. However, the material form of the document is important in this respect as well. First of all, the manager holds the document in his hand in an upright position all through the sequence. This means at least two things. First, this position makes it easy for the manager to read from the document. Secondly, the availability of the document is clearly observable to both of the participants. Also, all through the reading, the manager's gaze is towards the document (see Figure 1)<sup>2</sup>. Thus, through his orientation to the document as a material object, he displays that he is reading from the document. It is not before he begins the question that he turns his gaze towards the employee (line 8) and shows that he is expecting an answer from her.

Thus, the participation of the document in the interaction has not only a semiotic but also a material component. The text, with its demands and suggestions for topics and perspectives, is concretely present in the encounter. These two components are, however, intertwined. It is important that the text has a material presence, and that the material document includes the text. Through this intertwinedness the document attains its 'staying power', its capability to transcend time (Putnam and Cooren 2004). The human participants can depend on the text written during a previous appraisal interview residing in the material document; they can depend on it being the 'same' text. Thus, the material document can represent the agency of the text.

The third way the document participates in our data is to suggest ways of progressing in the interaction. In this respect, the material component of the document is particularly important. This can be seen in extract 2 in that the

---

2 The figures have been drawn from stills of the original videos by Eero Lehtinen.



**Figure 1:** Manager gazes towards document.

manager turns his gaze back towards the document already on line 10, before he has finished his question. This is a recurrent feature in the analyzed sequences. Our claim is that through this action the manager shows that he is already ready to go to the next issue and he thus does not expect a lengthy discussion of the present issue. He does it through reorienting towards the document as a material object.

This orientation on the part of the manager can be seen even more clearly in extract 3. In the extract, the manager first reads positive evaluations of the employee (from line 2 on), and then goals (lines 5–9). As a last issue he takes up the employee’s knowledge of the ‘collective agreement’ (line 14), that is, the contract on terms of employment between labor unions. The extract shows how the body text of the form and, in particular, its page-by-page structure, becomes relevant in the interaction and contributes to the agency of the document.

### Extract 3

**M holds document in his hand; M->doc; E has document on the table; E->M**

01 M: eli silloin kakstuhat kuus puhuttiin siitä että  
so then two thousand six we talked about how

**fig 2****{M grabs corner of document**

02 hy{vää on (.) asiakaspalvelu ja  
on the positive side is (.) customer service and

((lines omitted))

05 sitte (.) näit kehittävii asioit  
then (.) these issues to be developed

**{E->watch      {E->M**

06 oli {(0.9) oli virka{ehtosopimus ja  
were (0.9) were the collective agreement and

07 työsuhdeasiat ja, (0.5) asioihin  
employment issues and, (0.5) intervening

08 puuttumine ja, (0.3) sit arjen sujuminen  
in issues and, (0.3) then everyday routines

**{M->E**

09 toi ajankäy{t[ön hallinta, et se varmaa  
that tim[e management, that must have

[

10 E: [mm-m.

**fig 3****{M turns page****{M->doc**

11 M: oli sitä alk[uu,  
been part of that begi[nning,

[

12 E: [joo, (.) {£joo£,  
[yeah, (.) £yeah£,

13 (1.2)

14 M: onks toi vessi tullu  
has that CoAg ((collective agreement)) become

**{M->E**

**{M->doc**

15 ny{t sit[te  
now the[n

[

16 E: [£on tullu t[utuks (h)jo{oh on  
[£has become f[amiliar (h)yeah is

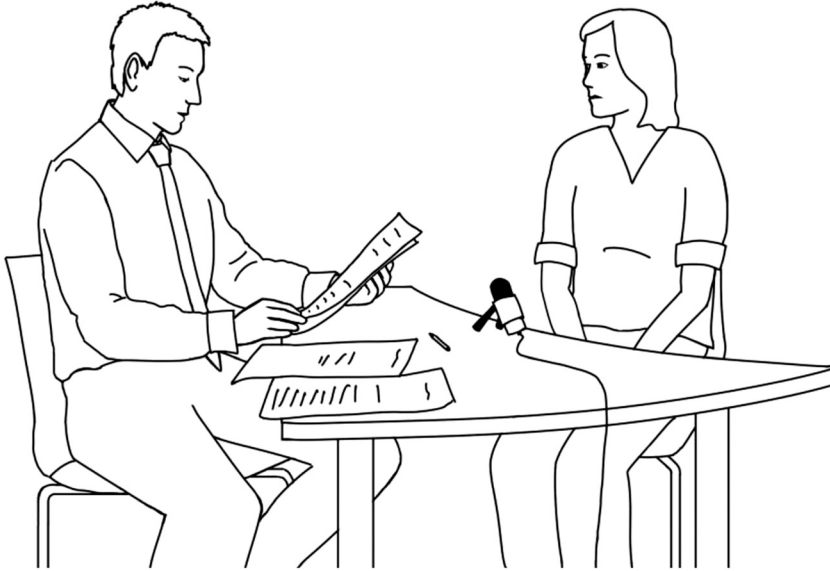


- 17 M: [heh heh ɛ(t{utuk-})ɛ  
[heh heh ɛ(famil-)ɛ
- 18 E: jo t[uttuɕ  
already f[amiliariɕ  
[
- 19 M: [ɛniif.  
[ɛyesɕ.

The manager starts reading from the document of a particular year. He is reading his entries on the first page of the document, under the title *ammatinhallinta* ‘professional competence’. For our analysis, it is important to note that the next two titles, *tuloksellisuus* ‘efficiency’ and *yhteistyökyky* ‘capability to cooperate’ are on the second page of the document. On lines 9–11 and 14–17 he asks two questions with regard to the goals that had been recorded in the form.

Just like in the previous extracts, the manager holds the document in his hand all through the extract, and his gaze is towards the document while he is reading his entries. At the end of the reading (line 9), right before he launches into the question, he lifts his gaze towards the employee. Also, right after the question (line 11), he turns his gaze back towards the document and displays his readiness to go quickly to the next issue. In this case, however, he also handles the document more extensively. This has to do with the fact that the next section of the form is on the next page. On line 2, almost simultaneously with the beginning of his reading of the entries, he grabs the corner of the document (Figure 2). This can be seen as preparatory with regard to turning the page. And indeed, on line 11, during the last word of his question, he does turn the page (Figure 3). Turning the page also precedes his shift of gaze towards the document. Thus, what he shifts his gaze to is the next page of the document that includes the next item in the form.

Therefore, from the standpoint of the human participants, we can say that the manager uses the document as a material resource to make relevant the body text of the form, its item-to-item organization. However, what is crucial here, again, is the fixedness of the form, and, in particular, the fixed relationship of the textual and material form of the document. That is, the textual form is reflected in the material form, in that the order of items on the form has a fixed page-by-page structure. Also, it is important that the form has been the same for several years in the organization, it has a history that is known to the participants. Thus, an institutional, organizational order has a material presence in the appraisal

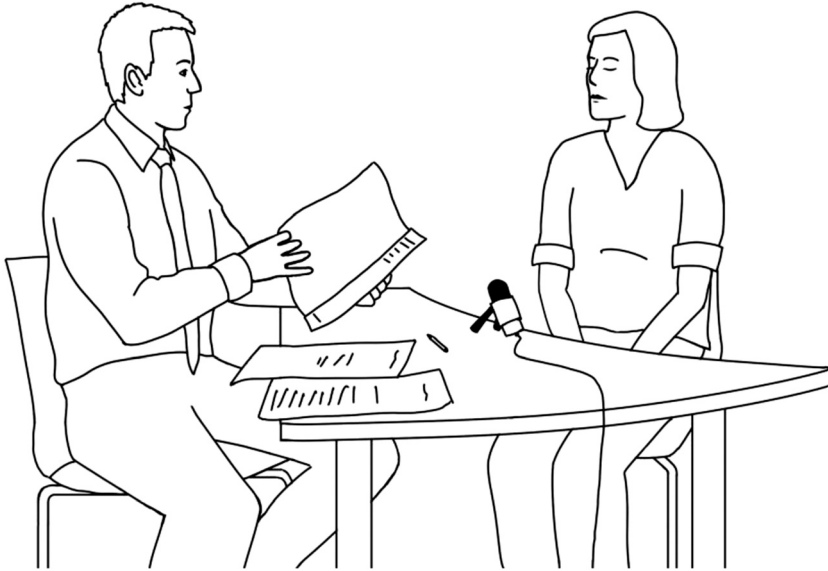


**Figure 2:** Manager graps corner of document.

interview, a material presence that makes a difference vis-à-vis the interaction in the encounter. Thus, we can say that at a particular stage of the encounter, with a particular page of the document open, the suggestion to shift to a particular next topic is already there in the document. What the manager then does through grabbing the corner of the page and consequently turning the page, is to make that suggestion temporally urgent.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

A number of studies building on diverse traditions and methodologies such as organizational communication (Putnam and Mumby 2014), ethnomethodology at work (Rouncefield and Tolmie 2016), and workplace studies (Heath and Luff 2000) have highlighted how texts – and working with texts – profoundly affect the unfolding of practices where people interact. Specifically, studies of workplace interaction have shown how both the material and the semiotic qualities of paper documents are important resources for interactants and how this intricate dual



**Figure 3:** Manager turns page.

quality of texts in general facilitates interactional practices in the workplace (e.g., Glenn and LeBaron 2011; Nielsen 2012; Svennevig 2012; Weilenmann and Lymer 2014).

In this article, we contributed to earlier work through taking into consideration the agency of textual documents in a new way. In our empirical analysis of a routinized sequence in dyadic manager-employee interaction, we identified different ways the text document had an effect in the interaction. The effect had to do with three different acts that were inscribed in the document: 1) presenting demands for the participants; 2) offering topics for the discussion as well as perspectives from which those topics should be discussed; and 3) suggesting conventional ways of progressing in the interaction. We also showed how the participants displayed their orientation to these acts in their interaction, how they became part of – in our case – the participants' activities of reading, asking questions and answering them, and topical progression in the interaction. In particular, we showed how both the semiotic and the material qualities of the document figured in the interaction, and how the two facets – the material and the semiotic – were systematically related: specific orientations to the material aspect of the paper form entailed specific orientations to the semiotic content.

These findings are informative of the textual agency of organizational texts in interaction, and we specifically add to the research of the role and agentivity of texts in organizations by showing the interactional relevance of text's capacity to remain and to work as an institutional memory and as a liable record of documentation.

In addressing agentivity, we drew from the literature on performativity and the non-human agency of texts in organizations (Cooren 2004; Putnam and Cooren 2004). Consistent with these views that represent the CCO approach to organizational communication, we conceptualized agency in terms of participation and any thing's capacity of making a difference (cf. Latour 2005: 71). However, as the CCO approach emphasizes, the "non-human agents" are not devoid of human agency (Cooren 2008; Pälli 2018). Thus, following Suchman (2007), we have stressed the dissymmetry of human and non-human agency. This is seen in our way of describing the textual agency as being 'inscribed' in the document. We want to stress that on the one hand the textual document, because of its fixedness, has an independent agentive status with regard to the human participants. On the other hand, the acts in the document have been inscribed by humans in another time and place, and it is human actants that attribute it a participatory role in interaction.

Also, our analysis suggests that the agency of the appraisal form, as well as its participatory status, is related to the recognition of its authority in the organization and as part of the organizational practice of appraisal interview. In the terminology proposed by Kuhn (2008), the manager's and employees' actions and orientations in the situation can be seen to enact an "authoritative text" that the concrete texts stands for. In this respect, the nature of the text as a form proves important; while entries inserted by the participants are given agency as well, it is the body text of the form that is treated as more authoritative.

Additionally, our study makes a methodological contribution by combining the organizational communication research regarding the performativity of texts with a detailed analysis of conversational interaction, which makes it possible to address the talk and embodied action occurring in conversations sequentially. In particular, this methodology makes it possible to connect the human interactants' orientation to the semiotic and material nature of the texts to the moment-by-moment flow of interaction. Thus, we believe that our paper can serve as a basis for future studies that apply the notion of textual and material agency in different contexts of interaction. For example, future studies could employ the methodology put forward in our paper for studying, in addition to different physical face-to-face meetings, also action and interaction in virtual platforms.

## Appendix 1: Transcription symbols

---

.	Falling intonation
,	Level intonation
?	Rising intonation
↓	Fall in pitch
↑	Rise in pitch
<u>word</u>	Emphasis
>word<	Faster pace than surrounding talk
<word>	Slower pace than surrounding talk
wo:rd	Lengthening of the sound
wo-	Word cut off
£word£	Smile voice
w(h)ord	Laugh particles inside word
hehe	Laughter
.hhh	Inbreath
hhh	Outbreath
[	Beginning of overlapping talk
]	End of overlapping talk
{	Beginning of overlapping nonverbal action
=	No pause between two adjacent utterances
(0.5)	Pause in seconds
(.)	Micro pause (less than 0.2 s)
(word)	Item in doubt
(-)	Talk not heard by transcriber
((word))	Transcriber's remarks
<b>grabs document</b>	Nonverbal action
<b>M-&gt;E</b>	direction of gaze

---

## References

- Anderson, Donald. 2004. The textualizing functions of writing for organizational change. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 18(2). 141–164.
- Ashcraft, Karen, Timothy Kuhn & Francois Cooren. 2009. Constitutional amendments: 'Materializing' organizational communication. *The Academy of Management Annals* 3(1). 1–64.
- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Clark, Andy. 2008. *Supersizing the mind: Embodiment, action, and cognitive extension*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cooren, Francois. 2004. Textual agency: How texts do things in organizational settings. *Organization* 11(3). 373–393.

- Cooren, Francois. 2008. Between semiotics and pragmatics: Opening language studies to textual agency. *Journal of Pragmatics* 40(1). 1–16.
- Cooren, Francois. 2015. In medias res: Communication, existence, and materiality. *Communication Research and Practice* 1(4). 307–321.
- Cooren, Francois & Nicolas Bencherki. 2010. How things do things with words: Ventriloquism, passion and technology. *Encyclopaideia, Journal of Phenomenology and Education* 28. 35–61.
- Cooren, Francois & Frederik Matte. 2010. For a constitutive pragmatics: Obama, Medecins Sans Frontieres and the measuring stick. *Pragmatics & Society* 1(1). 9–31.
- Cooren, Francois, Timothy Kuhn, Joep Cornelissen & Timothy Clark. 2011. Communication, organizing and organization: An overview and introduction to the special issue. *Organization Studies* 32(9). 1149–1170.
- Deppermann, Arnulf. 2013. Multimodal interaction from a conversation analytic perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics* 46(1). 1–7.
- Fayard, Anne-Laure & Anca Metiu. 2012. *The power of writing in organizations: From letters to online interactions*. New York: Routledge.
- Glenn, Phillip & Curtis LeBaron. 2011. Epistemic authority in employment interviews: Glancing, pointing, touching. *Discourse & Communication* 5(1). 3–22.
- Goody, Jack. 1986. *The logic of writing and the organisation of society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gumperz, John & Jenny Cook-Gumperz. 2005. Language standardization and the complexities of communicative practice. In Susan Mackinnon & Sydel Silverman (eds.), *Complexities: Beyond nature and nurture*, 268–288. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Heath, Christian & Paul Luff. 2000. *Technology in action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hepburn, Alexa & Galina B. Bolden. 2012. The conversation analytic approach to transcription. In Jack Sidnell & Tanya Stivers (eds.), *The handbook of conversation analysis*, 57–76. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Karlsson, Anna-Malin. 2009. Fixing meaning: On the semiotic and interactional role of written texts in a risk analysis meeting. *Text & Talk* 29(4). 415–438.
- Koschmann, Matthew. 2013. The communicative constitution of collective identity in interorganizational collaboration. *Management Communication Quarterly* 27(1). 61–89.
- Koschmann, Matthew & James McDonald. 2015. Organizational rituals, communication, and the question of agency. *Management Communication Quarterly* 29(2). 229–256.
- Kuhn, Timothy. 2008. A communicative theory of the firm: Developing an alternative perspective on intra-organizational power and stakeholder relationships. *Organization Studies* 29, 1227–1254.
- Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the social. An Introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McPhee, Robert & Marshall Scott Poole. 2001. Organizational structures and configurations. In Fredric Jablin & Linda Putnam (eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods*, 503–543. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Mikkola, Piia & Esa Lehtinen. 2014. Initiating activity shifts through use of appraisal forms as material objects during performance appraisal interviews. In Maurice Nevile, Pentti Haddington, Trine Heinemann & Mirka Rauniomaa (eds.), *Interacting with objects: Language, materiality, and social activity*, 57–78. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Nevile, Maurice, Pentti Haddington, Trine Heinemann & Mirka Rauniomaa. 2014. On the interactional ecology of objects. In Maurice Nevile, Pentti Haddington, Trine Heinemann &

- Mirka Rauniomaa (eds.), *Interacting with objects: Language, materiality and social activity*, 3–26. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Nielsen, Mie Femø. 2012. Using artifacts in brainstorming sessions to secure participation and decouple sequentiality. *Discourse Studies* 14(1). 87–109.
- Nissi, Riikka. 2015. From entry proposals to a joint statement: Practices of shared text production in multiparty meeting interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 79. 1–21.
- Ong, Walter J. 1986. Writing is a technology that restructures thought. In Gerd Baumann (ed.), *The written word: Literacy in transition*, 23–50. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pälli, Pekka, Eero Vaara & Virpi Sorsa, 2009. Strategy as text and discursive practice. A genre-based approach to strategizing in city administration. *Discourse & Communication* 3. 303-318.
- Pälli, Pekka. 2018. Ascribing materiality and agency to strategy in interaction: A language-based approach to the material agency of strategy. *Long Range Planning* 51. 436-450.
- Pälli, Pekka & Esa Lehtinen. 2014. Making objectives common in performance appraisal interviews. *Language & Communication*, 39, 92-108.
- Putnam, Linda & Francois Cooren. 2004. Alternative perspectives on the role of text and agency in constituting organizations. *Organization* 11(3). 323–333.
- Putnam, Linda & Dennis Mumby (eds.). 2014. *The Sage handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods*. Thousand Oaks (CA) & London: Sage.
- Rouncefield, Mark & Peter Tolmie. 2016. *Ethnomethodology at work*. New York: Routledge.
- Samra-Fredericks, Dalvir. 2005. Strategic practice, ‘discourse- and the everyday interactional constitution of ‘power effects’. *Organization* 12(6). 803–841.
- Sarangi, Srikant & Lucy Brookes-Howell. 2006. Recontextualizing the familial lifeworld in genetic counselling. In Maurizio Gotti & Francoise Salagar-Meyer (eds.), *Advances in medical discourse analysis: Oral and written contexts*, 197–228. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A. 2007. *Sequence organization in interaction: Volume 1: A primer in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A. & Harvey Sacks. 1973. Opening up closings. *Semiotica* 7(4). 289–327.
- Spee, Paul & Paula Jarzabkowski. 2011. Strategic planning as communicative process. *Organization Studies* 32(9). 1217–1245.
- Suchman, Lucy A. 2007. *Human-machine reconfigurations: Plans and situated actions*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Svennevig, Jan. 2012. The agenda as a resource for topic introduction in workplace meetings. *Discourse Studies* 14(1). 53–66.
- Taylor, James R. & Elizabeth Van Every. 2000. *The emergent organization: Communication as its site and surface*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Vásquez, Consuelo, Dennis Schoeneborn & Viviane Sergi. 2016. Summoning the spirits: Organizational texts and the (dis)ordering properties of communication. *Human Relations* 69(3). 629–659.
- Weilenmann, Alexandra & Gustav Lymer. 2014. Incidental and essential objects in interaction: Paper documents in journalistic work. In Maurice Nevile, Pentti Haddington, Trine Heinemann & Mirka Rauniomaa (eds.), *Interacting with objects: Language, materiality and social activity*, 319–337. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

## Bionotes

### **Esa Lehtinen**

Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, 40014, Jyväskylä, Finland

[esa.t.lehtinen@ju.fi](mailto:esa.t.lehtinen@ju.fi)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0218-6075>

Esa Lehtinen (Ph.D.) is Professor of Modern Finnish in the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He has conducted research on discourse in organizational, medical and religious contexts. In his recent projects he has investigated the intertwining of face-to-face encounters and written documents in organizations. He has published his work, for example, in *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Language and Communication*, *Patient Education and Counseling*, *Pragmatics*, and *Scandinavian Journal of Management*. Address for correspondence: Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, 40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

### **Pekka Pälli**

Department of Management Studies, Aalto University, P.O. Box 11000, 00076, Aalto, Finland

[pekka.palli@aalto.fi](mailto:pekka.palli@aalto.fi)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0287-8813>

Pekka Pälli (Ph.D., Adjunct Professor) works in the Aalto University School of Business in Finland, where he is Senior University Lecturer in Organizational Communication. His research interests cover, in particular, strategy discourse, leadership discourse, and workspace and workplace practices in terms of interaction at work. His scholarly work has been published both in organizational and linguistic journals, such as *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Long Range Planning*, *Discourse & Communication*, *Organization*, and *Language and Communication*. Address for correspondence: Department of Management Studies, Aalto University, P.O. Box 11000, 00076 Aalto, Finland.