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Author(s): Nissi, Riikka; Hirsto, Heidi

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Riikka Nissi* and Heidi Hirsto

Policing language in the world of new work: the commodification of workplace communication in organizational consulting

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Abstract: This paper examines how the shift to knowledge and innovation economy has created new sites for the commodification of language and communication in the context of organizational consulting. The data come from a consultant-led development and training program of the management teams of a Finnish educational organization. In the study, the year-long training was videotaped (45 h) and followed ethnographically. By using rhetorical discourse analysis as a method, we examine how the consultant-led training activities present the role of language and communication in changing working life. The results show how the activities factualize the transformation of work and the centrality of language in this transformation. They conceptualize language and communication as key elements of professional competence and resources for organizational improvement. Moreover, they construct causal relations between organizational success and the ability to assess and modify one's own communicative behavior. With its focus on language awareness and contextual variation the training differs from settings examined in previous studies where the mechanisms of commodification are based on standardization practices. In conclusion, we reflect the training programs both as indicators and vehicles for social change and discuss how they act as spaces where the new worlds of work are discursively construed.

Keywords: commodification of language; factualization; innovation economy; management training; organizational consulting; rhetorical discourse analysis

1 Introduction

It has been recognized for some time that language and communication play an important role in contemporary economy, both in the sense of work process – the

*Corresponding author: Riikka Nissi, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland,

E-mail: riikka.m.nissi@jyu.fi

Heidi Hirsto, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland, E-mail: heidi.hirsto@uva.fi

means through which work is accomplished – as well as work product. Studies in sociolinguistics and discourse studies have examined this increased influence of different languages and language varieties in globalized economy, where language and communication have new kind of exchange value in linguistically mediated knowledge and service industries and are thus viewed as a highly desirable commodity (e.g., Cameron 2000; Heller 2010; Heller and Duchêne 2012; Thurlow 2019). This phenomenon has been referred to as the commodification of language, its notable key sites being language teaching, translation, marketing, tourism, performance art and telecommunications in the form of call centers (Heller 2010).

What can be often seen in these contexts is the attempt to regulate and manage the linguistic resources and language practices used by various kinds of standardization measures (Heller 2010; Heller and Duchêne 2012). Fairclough (1996: 3) has called this the technologization of discourse, namely, “the systematic integration of research on language, design and redesign of language practices and the training of institutional personnel into these practices”. Such technologization takes place typically through training manuals or workplace seminars. Previous studies have examined, for example, the dissemination of global communication norms through the teaching of homogenized communications skills (Cameron 2002) and top-down stylizing of employee language, manifested in the tight control of the features of spoken interaction (Cameron 2000). However, this kind of regulation also entails certain tensions and dilemmas. Firstly, standardization is always confronted with linguistic variability which is difficult to standardize because language use is naturally contextual. Secondly, the attempts to suppress contextual language use conflict with the very ideals of the new work order that emphasizes employee flexibility, individuality and alternative action (Gee et al. 1996; Heller 2010).

In this study,¹ we examine these tensions in the context of organizational consulting that, in our view, forms a new and growing site for the commodification of language and communication, especially spoken interaction. The aim of the paper is to shed light on the ways in which language and communication are regulated and policed in a discursive context that in principle rejects such regulation. Our data come from a consultant-led development and training program of the management teams of a Finnish educational organization. We focus on the consultant-led training activities and study how they present the role of language and communication in changing working life.

Methodologically, we utilize rhetorical discourse analysis, namely, discourse analytical approaches that examine the dimensions of persuasive discourse and the way certain versions of reality are socially constructed and pursued in and through language use (see e.g., Jokinen 2016; Mueller and Whittle 2011; Potter 1996).

¹ The research has been funded by Finnish Cultural Foundation.

In particular, we draw on studies that examine factualization, that is, discursive devices used to portray the social reality as indisputable and self-evident (Juhila 2016; Potter 1996). In previous research, discursive devices and fact construction have also been examined in the context of consulting. Kykyri et al. (2007) have, for instance, analyzed how preferred outcomes are factualized in organizational consulting by means of appointing one of the participants the position of a witness. Whittle et al. (2008; also Mueller and Whittle 2011) have, for their part, studied how “change champions” use a number of discursive devices to deal with contradiction and resistance to change in organizational training. In this study, our focus is on commodification: the ways in which the training is discursively organized to create an argumentative context where descriptions about language and communication are built into socially accepted facts and conceptualized as legitimate sellable items for the purposes of the consulting enterprise.

2 Organizational consulting as a context for regulating discourse

While organizational consulting has a long history, its current influential position is based especially on the rapid growth and stabilization of the industry during the 1980s and 1990s, when it expanded from the US and the UK to many other European countries, and from business to public administration. It has been assessed that management consultants played a key role in the broad-based managerialization of the public sector also in the Nordic countries (Czarniawska and Massa 2013). Management consulting in general, and its application to public sector organizations in particular, have been subject to considerable criticism. According to Von Platen (2018: 5) organizational consultancy is “imbued with challenges concerning legitimacy and trust” due to, for example, ambiguous standards of professionalism in the field, as well as negative popular image of consultants’ work. In the public sector, there have been concerns for instance about “consultocracy” replacing historically developed, national or local practices with “white, masculine, North American rational ideas” (Sturdy 2009: 459).

As an organizational practice, consulting may address a variety of organizational, management, and leadership practices from strategic planning to market analysis and organizational restructuring. In addition, recent years have witnessed growth in consulting services focusing explicitly on communication, and especially on external communication such as media relations and branding (Von Platen 2018). It may be argued, however, that most organizational consulting practices engage deeply with language and communication, even though this connection is not

always made explicit. Management consultants take divergent roles in relation to the client organizations, acting, for example, as providers of knowledge and expertise; as change agents engaged in developing organizational processes; as fashion setters disseminating and translating new management ideas; and as social psychologists helping managers to create a sense of control and meaning in their work (Mueller and Whittle, 2011; Von Platen 2015). In addition, consultants work as external “second-order” observers, enabling self-reflection within the organization (Röttger and Preusse 2013).

Organizational consulting has traditionally strong connections to business schools, which means that in their efforts to facilitate organizational change, consultants often draw upon and circulate theories of management and leadership that are prevalent in academia at a given point of time (Czarniawska and Massa 2013). While there are many ways to reconstruct the development of management and leadership thought, there seems to be a consensus that recent decades have witnessed a shift from positivist theorizing and essentialist and “heroic” leadership models towards post-positivist and relational understandings of leadership (Uhl-Bien 2006). The shift is often conceptualized as dissociation from the tradition of “scientific” management ideas, including Fordist and Taylorist management models and their focus on improving productivity through optimization and standardization (see Mannevu 2015). In contrast to these models, the current “relational” views on leadership emphasize the situated, embedded and interpersonal nature of organizing and leadership. Accordingly, they come to assign renewed value to relational and identity-related practices and qualities such as affect, reflection, and self-expression (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Hosking 1988), which in the Taylorist model were seen primarily as disturbances to efficiency pursuits.

The shift from the standardization-focused models of scientific management towards relationship-focused models of leadership entails a corresponding shift in conceptions of language and communication. Scientific management models typically view communication as transfer of information or as strategic manipulation of messages to achieve organizational goals – and therefore as subject to similar standardization aspirations as other organizational processes, quite in accordance with the traditional view on policing and controlling language use (Cameron 2000, 2002). Relational leadership theories, by contrast, are explicitly based on a constitutive or performative view on language, which puts communication in the center of organizational processes, regarding leadership and other organizational practices as emerging from and enacted through situated interaction and everyday communicative encounters (Abell and Simons 2000; Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Uhl-Bien 2006).

In the practice of management consulting, the new relational and constructionist ideas come in contact with conventional understandings and practices of management and consulting, often creating tensions and paradoxes (Czarniawska 2001).

Whereas traditionally, the aim of consulting was to replace existing representations or visions of the organization with new ones, ideally without revealing the details of the process (Czarniawska 2001), the constructionist perspective tends to foreground the communicative nature of the consulting process itself, “revealing the props” (Czarniawska and Massa 2003: 284) “in the hope of provoking reflection” (Czarniawska 2001: 263). The paradox is that removing from consulting service the “magical” element that produces new representations of the organization, i.e. rendering visible the discursive work it entails and indeed partly delegating it to participants themselves, makes the consulting service harder to sell. As the nature of the consulting service becomes less obvious, its value for the client must be rhetorically established. Hence, consultants need to find new ways to approach language and communication as malleable and manageable without compromising their commitment to the constructionist premises of relational leadership thought.

In this paper, we study how consultants deal with this tension in training sessions with the members of their client organization. Training has been viewed as one of the primary sites of consulting, an institutionalized format through which management ideas, values, and practices can be disseminated and jointly produced (see Mueller and Whittle 2011: 197). For the purposes of this paper, then, training provides a particularly useful site for observing the struggle of commodifying constructionist understandings of language, communication, and organization.

3 Data and method

The data for the study come from a training and development program of the management teams – steering groups – of a Finnish public educational organization, namely, a school district responsible for providing comprehensive education for children aged 7–15 years. The training was provided by a private consulting company specializing in change processes, participative leadership and innovation cultures, and it aimed at renewing the organizational culture by identifying the challenges and development areas in the schools’ leadership practices.

The training took place at the time of a reform of the national core curriculum for basic education: during the training the schools were preparing for the implementation of the new curriculum with a focus on school culture and integrative approach. Otherwise the steering groups operated in different kinds of organizational environments. During the two initial meetings between the leading consultant and the upper management, it was agreed that the training would be run using a social constructionist perspective. In other words, the consultant would use methods that aid the steering groups to see their organizational reality as a joint accomplishment constructed in and through daily work practices in order to find alternatives to these practices.

The training lasted for eight months and was organized as specific training days occurring at regular intervals. The training days were attended by multiple participants: depending on the module, there were 1–2 consultants from the consulting company, upper management of the organization, various visiting speakers as well as the actual trainees, 13–45 steering groups from different local schools. Typically, the steering groups had 5–6 members, one of them being the head master with a recognized management and leadership qualification and others ordinary school teachers. The training days took place in gymnastic halls or congress and meeting premises outside the schools and consisted of lectures by the consultant and other speakers and various reflexive exercises undertaken by the steering groups. In collecting the data, the whole training process was ethnographically followed by the first author through participant observation as well as video recorded, leading up to 45 h of video data. In video recording, the consultant, upper management and three specific steering groups were followed by using several cameras. Various texts, such as the PowerPoint slides of the consultant, were also collected.

Our analytical framework of rhetorical discourse analysis was chosen because it allowed us to account for both the institutional purpose and structured nature of the training, and the micro-level practices of persuasive language use. Initially, we became interested in fact construction as we noticed that the consultant's talk consisted of numerous references to "language" and "interaction" that seemed to have a definitive character. At first, we collected all such instances and conducted a preliminary analysis about the factualization devices used in them. In the consulting context, two devices turned out to be pertinent: externalization, which refers to practices that construct the description independent of the speaker, and categorization, which refers to practices that ascribe certain qualities and characters to a person or an object (cf. Potter 1996: 150, 176). After that, we continued the analysis by examining how the different devices were employed in specific activity contexts (see Levinson 1992) salient for the training and took under scrutiny three training activities: (1) consultant's lectures, (2) group assignments and (3) sharing of thoughts.

In the analysis, we focused first on examining the way the training activities unfolded in training interaction, following the view that fact construction is intertwined with sequentially organized social action (cf. Potter 1996). Here we utilized ethnomethodological conversation analysis with a focus on action formation and ascription (Levinson 2012). Second, we analyzed each activity with reference to how it worked to facilitate the commodification of language and communication in the consulting context. Finally, we analyzed the position of these activities in the overall structure of the training day and the whole training program in order to see how the views concerning language and communication were factualized during the longitudinal policy process.

4 The commodification of language and communication through training activities

In the following, we analyze the way language and communication are commodified within the core training activities.

4.1 Consultant's lecture: presenting the transformation of work as a rationale for rethinking communication

One of the recurrent activities of the training is the consultant's lecture. It always opens up the training day although the consultant may also deliver shorter lectures later in the day. As an activity, the consultant's lecture appears in the form of a PowerPoint presentation that can be seen as an established form of information delivery (see Nissi and Lehtinen 2016; Rendle-Short 2006; Yates and Orlikowski 2007). In PowerPoint presentations, different epistemic positions are constructed for the presenter and the recipients, the presenter being typically treated as the knowing participant. More importantly, although seemingly neutral, the presentation actively assembles information by legitimizing certain ideas while dismissing others (Nissi and Lehtinen 2016). In this way, in the training, the presentation form itself acts as an externalization device (cf. Potter 1996) that detaches the content of the presentation from the agenda and motives of the speaker who seems to be only delivering factual information belonging to some expertise domain.

This can be seen from extract 1, which comes from the very first training day of the program and shows the consultant's talk² and the PowerPoint slide used. The consultant is delivering his opening lecture where he outlines the history of western work and organizational management.

Extract 1. First training day in September. (C = consultant)

- 01 C: *mut sitte ku on tultu yhä enemmän tietoyhteiskuntaan ja*
but then as we have moved more towards the information society and
- 02 *tiedon muodostuminen (.) on se (.) tärkeä asia. (.) ja tieto*
knowledge construction (.) is the (.) core issue. (.) and knowledge
- 03 *muodostuu (0.3) teidän vuorovaikutussuhteissa. (0.3) niissä*
is constructed (0.3) in your interactional relations. (0.3) in nthose

² See Appendix for the transcription conventions.

- 04 vuorovaikutussuhteissa. (0.3) ↑niissä suhteissa joissa keskustelette
interactional relations. (0.3) in ↑those relations where you discuss
- 05 keskenään. (0.3) johtoryhmälle tulee joku uus asia pöydälle
together. (0.3) when the steering group has some new issue to deal
- 06 (.) niin sen täytyy alkaa ↑puhua keskenään ja ajatella ja
with (.) they have to begin to ↑talk with each other and think and
- 07 keskustella. (0.3) ja ↑muodostaa ymmärrystä ja tietoa
discuss. (0.3) and ↑create understanding and knowledge
- 08 että mik- (.) mitä me nähdään tässä asiassa. (0.4) minkälaisia
about wy- (.) what do we see here in this matter. (0.4) what kinds of
- 09 piirteitä siinä nähdään. (0.3) kuinka ymmärtää sitä (0.5) mitä me
features do we see in it. (0.3) how to understand what (0.5) we
- 10 nähdään. (0.3) pitäskö siitä jonkinlaisia ↑toiminnallisia
see. (0.3) should we draw some ↑practical
- 11 johtopäätöksiä tehdä. (0.5) .hh ja ↑kaikki tää tapahtuu keskustelun
conclusions. (0.5) .hh and ↑all this takes place through
- 12 kautta.
conversation.
- ((lines omitted))
- 13 ja useimmiten juuri (.) systeemit (.) eli (.) eli (.)
and usually it is exactly the (.) systems (.) namely (.) namely (.)
- 14 tämmöset (0.3) keskustelun (.) <kaavat> (0.7) niin (0.4)
these kinds of (0.3) conversational (.) <patterns> (0.7) that (0.4)
- 15 myön↑teisessä mielessä hallitsee sitä ryhmää. (0.5) mutta usein (0.3)
govern the group in a positive manner. (0.5) but often (0.3)
- 16 ennakoimattomassa ympäristössä (0.3) se on aikamoinen haaste (.)
in an unpredictable environment (0.3) it is quite a challenge (.)
- 17 että meidän pitä selvitä siinä uudessa
that we should survive with <↑old ways of acting> in that new
- 18 ympäristössä. (.) jossa pitä selvitä siinä uudella tavalla. (.) pitäis
environment. (.) where one should act in a new way. (.) should

- 19 luoda jotain uusia ratkaisuja.
create some new solutions.

((lines omitted))



MUUTTUVA TOIMINTAYMPÄRISTÖ

- Organisaatiot toimivat toimitvat yhä enemmän vaihtelevissa, ennakoitavuudeltaan heikoissa ympäristössä
- Tapahtumat ovat monin tavoin toisiinsa kietoutuneita, kompleksisia
 → organisaatioilta vaaditaan uudenlaisia kyvykkyyksiä (sopeutuvuus, ketteryys, toipumiskyky/ resilienssi, kyky hyötyä turbulenssista)
- Perinteiset hierarkkiset rakenteet ja toimintatavat eivät toimi
 - Työn luonne on muuttunut, hajautuminen; riippumattomuus ajasta & monipaikkaisuus, verkostomaisuus
- Uudenlaisessa organisaatiokontekstissa toimiminen edellyttää myös henkilöstöltä uudenlaisia muutoksessa elämisen taitoja

CHANGING OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

- Organizations act more and more in changing, poorly predictable environments
- Events are in many ways intertwined, complex
 ⇒ organizations need new kinds of abilities (adaptability, organizational agility, resilience, ability to utilize turbulence)
- Traditional hierarchical structures and practices do not work
- The nature of work has changed, divergence; not dependent on time & multilocality, networked nature
- Operating in new kind of organizational context also requires new kinds of skills to live through change

*CHANGES A SLIDE

- 20 *sillä tavalla tämmöessä muuttuvassa toimintaympäristössä pitä^s olla
**in this way in changing operational environment one should have*
- 21 vähän joustavampi se puhe- ja ajattelukäytäntö.
a bit more flexible ways of talking and thinking.

In his presentation, the consultant constructs a historical timeline of work and construes a transition to present-day working life with its focus on knowledge construction with the use of a temporal adverb *sitte* ‘then’ (lines 1–2). After that, he begins to explain the way knowledge is created through interactional relations (lines 2–12). Here, the consultant does not explicitly address the recipients, but refers to the steering group in the third person (line 5) and produces questions where he directly quotes their discussions (lines 8–11), thus making the everyday manifestation of the notion of “interactional knowledge construction” understandable and offering the recipients a place for identification, but at the same time, construing the steering group actions as an object of observation and assessment.

Importantly, after that, the consultant begins to assess the use of language in the negative manner. The negative evaluation is built incrementally and embedded in the information delivery so that it does not place the blame on the recipients or hold them directly accountable for their actions. At first, the consultant explains there are “systems” in the conversation (lines 13–14). The term can be seen to belong to the specialized lexicon and expertise domain of the consultant: he rephrases it with a more mundane term *kaavat* ‘patterns’ (line 14) by using an indefinite marker *tämmönen* ‘these kinds of’ (line 14) which brings the features of the referent into the spotlight and thus has an introductory function (Hakulinen et al. 2004, § 1411). The actual existence of the patterns is assessed in the positive manner (line 15). However, the consultant builds the negative evaluation by making a claim about the changing operating environment where the old ways of acting – namely, the old patterns – are a “challenge” (line 16). Here, he uses inclusive “we” (line 17) and thus positions himself in the same identity category with the recipients, namely, workers whose “patterns” are at the risk of belonging to the previous phase of the work timeline and are thus not sufficient in the new world of work that has just emerged. In this way, the consultant deconstructs the epistemic and deontic hierarchies related to the presentation activity (cf. Nissi and Lehtinen 2016) and preempts possible resistance. At the same time, the description of the transformation of work grows into a description of large-scale crisis facing all western work.

The overall argument put forth in the presentation is that there has been a historical transformation of work: the new world of work includes complexities,

mobilities and unpredictabilities that were not present in the earlier phases. This is the rhetorical premise where one can draw a conclusion that the old, standardized ways of using language no longer work, but new, flexible ways of interacting – and constructing knowledge through interaction – are needed (lines 20–21). However, the conclusion is only valid if the premise is accepted, so finally the consultant also aims at factualizing the transformation of work in various ways. This is done multimodally, for example, by using a PowerPoint slide (see line 20) that employs a list structure, a semiotic resource for creating a paradigm and presenting an inventory of its components and thus establishing regularities in the social world (cf. Djonov and van Leeuwen 2014; Ledin and Machin 2015). All in all, in the presentation, language and communication are therefore conceptualized not only as tools, but also as a target of development. As the same kind of presentation is repeated at the beginning of each training day and in the short form during the event, it creates a context for the training and legitimizes it.

4.2 Group assignment: establishing and enacting new ways of talking as a key professional competence

While the lectures are generic in nature, they form a basis for another salient interactional activity, that is, reflexive sequence during which, firstly, the consultant issues to the steering groups a request to reflect on their professional practices, and secondly, the group members respond to the request by engaging in task-oriented discussion. Importantly, in this reflexive exercise, the overall idea about the transformation of work and the need for new ways of talking and thinking are turned into professional goals with unquestionable aspirations and moral accountabilities.

This is shown in extract 2, which is also from the first training day. The extract takes place at the end of the day.

Extract 2. First training day in September. Group 1. (C = consultant, P1 & P2 = participants 1 & 2 from the same steering group)

- 01 C: uusiutumisessa (.) jos palataan kieleen (0.3) niin tarkoittaa että on
in renewal (.) if we go back to language (0.3) it means that one
- 02 <pakko> ruveta puhumaan uudella tavalla (.) käyttämään jotain uusia
<must> *begin to talk in a new way (.) to use some new*
- 03 sanoja. (.) .hh ja tää (.) konkreettinen tehtävä on se (.) että
words. (.) .hh and this (.) concrete task is (.) that

- 04 että johtoryhmässä (0.4) †keskustelkaa (.) <mitä
that have a †discussion (0.4) in a steering group (.) about <what
- 05 (.) uutta (.) puhetta (.) tänään (.) olette (0.3) synnyttäneet.>
(.) new (.) talk (.) have you (.) created (0.3) today>.
- 06 (0.4) joku uusi sana (.) uusi ajatus.
(0.4) some new word (.) a new thought.
- ((lines omitted))
- 07 P1: elikkä (0.3) mitä (.) uusia (.) sanoja (.) keksimme.
so (0.3) what (.) new words (.) did we come up with.
- 08 (0.3)
- 09 P2: (mun mielestä) rauhasta me ei olla puhuttu aikasemmi.
(I think) we haven't talked about peace before.
- 10 P1: †ei me oo puhuttu kyllä rauhas- siis tämmösestä niinkun (0.3)
†no we surely haven't talked about pea- like this kind of (0.3)
- 11 rauhasta ja pelkistämisestä
peace and simplification

As seen from the extract, the consultant firsts recaps the argument introduced in the lecture, namely, that there is a need for new ways of talking (lines 1–2). However, here he uses a compound structure *on pakko* ‘has to’ that expresses strong deontic modality (Hakulinen et al. 2004, § 1581) and thus outlines the absolute necessity of developing language use. In this way, the reason for such necessity – the renewal of professional practices – is treated as a self-evident goal as the turn rather highlights language and communication as a means to achieve this goal. After that, the consultant addresses the recipients directly by giving them a task assignment (lines 3–5) that is syntactically tied to the first component of the turn with the use of a particle *ja* ‘and’ (line 3). By doing so, he transforms the before mentioned necessity into a professional ambition that concerns specifically the steering group members present in the training and holds them morally accountable for whether they have been able to create these new capabilities – and to make use of the training that should be at the center of their interests as professional actors.

In his request, the consultant defines the new ways of talking as “new words” (lines 2–3, 6). For the recipients, the lexical items form an easily recognizable part

of language and focusing on them thus aids the newly introduced activity of reflecting one's own language use. In the extract, the participants jointly formulate a word or a concept that they have not used before (lines 7–11) and thus acquiesce to the request and the agenda of the consultant.

As the training proceeds, the reflexive group assignments become increasingly more challenging. In extract 3, the consultant has given the steering groups a task of reflecting organizational processes. After that, they are given another task where they are to reflect about the way they just talked earlier. However, this time, the consultant specifically requests the steering groups to identify their conversational patterns, conceptualizing the new ways of talking not only as “words”, but also as new “habits”, namely, linguistic practices.

Extract 3. Training day in October. Group 1.

- 01 C: lyhyt reflektio joka ryhmään että (.) että mikä tässä on semmosta
short reflection in each group that (.) that what is kind of
- 02 tuttua vähän niinku (.) teidän (.) ryhmänne <kaavaa>. (0.3) näinhän
familiar a bit like (.) <the pattern> (.) of your group. (0.3) this
- 03 meillä aina jutellaan ((sanoja poistettu)) ja (.) koittakaa
surely is the way we always talk ((words omitted)) and (.) try to
- 04 miettiä että mikä oli pisara <uutta>. (0.4) että viime kerralla
think what was the drop of something <new>. (0.4) last time
- 05 sanoin että jos johtoryhmänä haluatte kehittyä teijän
I said that if you want to develop as a steering group you
- 06 täytyy vaan oppia puhumaan uudella tavalla. (.) ja teijän täytys
just have to learn to talk in a new way. (.) and you should try to
- 07 vahvistaa joitaki uusia sanoja (.) uusia tapoja (0.3) tehdä
strengthen some new words (.) new habits (0.3) make
- 08 poikkeamia siihen arjen keskusteluun. (.) se ei tarkoita
deviations from the mundane conversation. (.) it does not mean
- 09 (että te voitte) tehdä huippusuorituksia (.) sillä tavalla kun
(that you can) make top performances (.) also in a way
- 10 te nytki puhutte (.) mut jos te haluatte kehittyä johtoryhmänä niin
you now talk (.) but if you want to develop as a steering group then

- 11 teijän on pakko puhuu uu- u- (.) uudella tavalla jotenki
you must talk in ne- ne- (.) somehow in a new way
- 12 ((lines omitted))
- 13 P1: mää mietin että meijän puheessa kyllä se on se että (.) me lähetään
I think that in our talk it surely is that (.) we (kind of) start
- 14 (niinku) jostain asiasta? (.) ja ↑sitte me aika nopeesti
(like) from some issue? (.) and ↑then we quite soon
- 15 rön[syillään ↑tonne tonne tonne tonne
move [on to ↑there there there there
- 16 P2: [mm

The consultant's turn includes two components: firstly, a request to think what is the pattern of the group in the usual setting (lines 1–3), and secondly, a request to think how the earlier talk differed from the usual pattern (lines 3–4). However, the requests are designed differently, the latter one being formed with the use of a verb *koittakaa* 'try to' (line 3) and thus framed as an additional and potentially more challenging part of the assignment. In this way, the request implies that the training has already begun to change the routinized ways of talking – even though the ways in which this has taken place may be difficult to capture and verbalize.

After the actual delivery of the request, the consultant begins to elaborate the second part. Here, he uses conditional constructions (lines 5–6, 10–11) that establish a causal relation between two matters: the first clause introduces a condition for the state of affairs disclosed in the latter clause, where they are presented as probable if the condition mentioned in the first clause is actualized (cf. Nissi 2016). Shortly, if one has a desire to develop, then one must embrace new ways of talking. By doing so, the consultant discursively constructs the world where any change in organizational practices takes place through the manipulation of linguistic and interactional resources. At the same time, the turn circulates the neo-liberal discourses of empowerment and personal development (cf. Nissi and Dlaske 2020), and the overall ideology that it thus advocates is the willingness to change and improve. In this way, it also establishes a certain membership category (see Housley and Fitzgerald 2015) – a steering group member – for the participants and presents such desires as its intrinsic and morally expected category-bound feature.

To conclude, the group assignments have a lot of rhetorical power, as they factualize social groups and identities, their professional goals as well as deficiencies in their linguistic and communicative practices, urging the participants to recognize these problems and orient to resolving them in their discussion (see lines 13–16 above). The assignments also suggest that the reflexive exercises have been set up for the sake of the participants' own good, construing them as the beneficiaries of the requests (cf. Clayman and Heritage 2014) and thus authorizing the exercises by showing that their aims are compatible with the participants' aspirations.

4.3 Sharing of thoughts: affirming productive change through testimonials

In the training, the reflexive exercise is often followed by another interactional activity, sharing of thoughts and reflections, where the consultant asks the participants to disclose the main points of their group discussion to the rest of the training attendants. Similar to the consulting data of Kykyri et al. (2007) where one of the participants was asked to discuss change and thus acted as a 'witness', sharing of thoughts functions as a testimonial that affirms and stabilizes change brought by the training by letting the participants to collectively witness the renewal of the professional practices. However, it also has another important function: as the groups undertake the exercises privately, the public sharing gives the consultant an opportunity to monitor and potentially correct the groups' interpretative work. This is shown in extract 4, where the groups have just finished their reflexive exercise, followed by the consultant's new request to share their observations about change publicly. Group two is chosen spontaneously by the consultant and does not have time to get prepared for the questions posed by him.

Extract 4. October. Group 2. (C = consultant, P1 = participant 1)

- 01 C: muuttuko teidän johtoryhmän puhuminen jollain tavalla mikä siinä
did your steering group talk change somehow what
- 02 säily samanlaisena ja tuliko jotain uutta tapaa puhua jotain uusia
stayed the same and was there some new way of talking some new
- 03 sanoja tai ajatuksia
words or thoughts
- ((lines omitted))

- 04 P1: no ei varsinaisesti tullu uusia sanoja eikä (.) öh (.) >usia
well not really any new words or (.) uhm (.) >new
- 05 ajatuksia (kyl tuli)< että (.) tavallaan (.) alko
thoughts (we surely had)< that (.) in a way (.) it began to
- 06 kirkastumaan tää (.) jotenkin (.) (-) tää (.) se muokkautuu se
crystallize (.) somehow (.) (-) this (.) the model began to
- 07 malli (.) tavallaan (.) (-).
take shape (.) in a way (.) (-).
- 08 C: joo.
yes.
- 09 (.)
- 10 C: mutta joku muuttu kuitenkin osaatko sanoa ↑mikä tuli uutena
but something anyhow changed can you say ↑what came as new
- 11 minkä muutoksen se saattoi luoda tähän.
what kind of change it could have created here.
- 12 P1: no uusia(ki) ajatuksia (-)
well new thoughts (-)
- 13 C: joo.
yes.
- 14 (.)
- 15 C: mä ajattelen et mä kysyn tän parista muusta ryhmästä vielä (ihan
I think that I will still ask this from few other groups (just
- 16 nopeesti vielä sen että) tää kysymys että (.) niinku edellisellä
quickly the thing that) the question that (.) as I also said
- 17 kerrallaki sanoin että se kysymys siitä että ↑mitä uutta ootte
in the previous time that the question about ↑what new things have
- 18 nyt puhunu (.) ja mikä on erilaista puhetta ku
you now discussed (.) and what is different kind of talk than
- 19 aikasemmin on sellanen joka kannattas ↑aina poimia esiin. (.)
previously is something that one should ↑always try to pick up. (.)

- 20 koska useimmitenhan se (.) alkaa fvähän niinkuin sä kerroit että\$
because usually (.) it begins \$a bit like you said that\$
- 21 (.) meille ei varsinaisesti tullu mitään uutta eikä uusia sanoja mut
 (.) *we did not really have anything new or new words but*
- 22 siinä on vähän ↑pelottavaakin huomata se yks prosentti
it is actually a bit ↑frightening for one to notice that one percent
- 23 tai kaks prosenttia joka on <toisin>. (.) se on se miten te
or two percent that is <different>. (.) this is how you renew
- 24 uudistutte. (.) teidän omaan uudistumiseen ja innovaatiokykyyn
yourself. (.) you can access your own renewal and innovation capacity
- 25 pääsette <konkreettisesti kiinni> (.) kun (.) alatte puhua siitä
in a <concrete manner> (.) when (.) you begin to talk about
- 26 mikä <tällä kertaa keskustelussa oli erilaista>.
what <in this time was different in a conversation>.
- 27 (.) jos te ette löydä sitä erilaista ettekä sano sitä <↑ääneen> (.)
 (.) *if you cannot find that difference or do not <↑verbalize it> (.)*
- 28 voitte olla varmoja että ei ↑tuu mitään innovaatioita eikä
you can be sure that there ↑will not be any innovations and
- 29 tuu mitään \$uutta\$.
there will not be anything \$new\$.

The consultant addresses the question directly to one of the group members, asking him again to pinpoint new words, thoughts or ways of talking (lines 1–3). However, although the chosen participant confirms the emergence of “new thoughts” (lines 4–5), his answer (lines 4–7) is vague and does not represent the response the consultant’s question seems to be projecting. The consultant repeats the question (lines 10–11), making another attempt to elicit the expected response, but without success (see line 12).³ This is a potentially delicate situation for both: for the participant, because his answer is made publicly exemplary, but he is not able to identify any change in language use; for the consultant, because it indicates that the training might not have worked in the expected way. This trouble leads to a follow-up turn (lines 15–29) where the problem is resolved.

³ The interactional problems may be due to P1’s unpreparedness or resistance, which also occurs in our data.

In the extract, the participants are caught in the situation where they are faced with more than one version of the world – either there has or has not been change – and the follow-up turn has been designed to settle this “reality disjuncture” (Pollner 1975). As shown in earlier research, the solution may take the form where, after producing the competing versions, the first speaker (in this case the consultant) actually uses version two (“there has been no change”) to prove that version one (“there has been change”) is the objective truth (cf. Pollner 1975). In other words, the consultant contextualizes and psychologizes the denial as part of the inner change process the participants are going through (lines 20–23). The follow-up turn thus acts as a means to normalize the trouble: normalizing has been previously studied, for example, in student counseling where it acts as the counselor’s way to manage the student’s negative emotions (Svinhufvud et al. 2017). Here, it shifts the blame away from the consultant and training and testifies about change: change exists because the participants are “frightened” about it and have trouble admitting it. Therefore, the way the reality disjuncture is resolved asserts the consultant’s right to interpret, categorize and define the world of work and although the sharing of thoughts does not seemingly work, it secures his agenda.

Sometimes the sharing of thoughts is also accomplished by other participants than the steering group members, namely, members of the upper management who work in the administration of the school district and do not have a direct involvement in the everyday matters of the local schools. In the training, they assist the consultant and observe the training activities without taking part in the actual group discussions. Their testimonies can be seen to have a distinct function, as they are shown to bring in the voice of an outside observer who – unlike the steering group members – does not participate in the situation in order to be “trained”. Extract 5 comes from the last training day where the outsider’s testimonies are used to sum up the whole training program. The participants invited to share their thoughts are three members of the upper management and the HR person of the organization. At the beginning of the extract, the consultant specifically asks for “their perspective” (line 2), thus differentiating it from the viewpoint of the subjective experienter and construing them the position of an independent and objective discussant.

Extract 5. Last training day in April. (C = consultant, M = member of the upper manager)

- 01 C: ja nyt sitten ((sanoja poistettu)) †jokunen kommentti vähän kaikilta
and now then ((words omitted)) †some comment from everyone
- 02 että mitä tää (.) miltä tää on näyttäny teidän näkökulmastanne.
that what does this (.) how has this appeared from your viewpoint.
- ((lines omitted))

- 03 M: ja sit vielä kolmas teema (0.3) mikä on itseä mietityttäny
and then still the third theme (0.3) what I have been thinking myself
- 04 et mulla on hyvin henkilökohtainen (0.3) .hh ↑suhde sanaan
is that I have a very personal (0.3) .hh ↑relation to the word
- 05 johtamispuhe tuolta menneisyydestä niin (0.3) .hh ja mä oon jotenki
leadership talk due to previous times so (0.3) .hh and I am somehow
- 06 niin (0.5) välillä se on mua tässä ärsyttänyt\$ heh että (0.3) @mitä
so (0.5) sometimes it has \$annoyed\$ me here heh that (0.3) @what
- 07 se johtamispuhe@ nyt ↑on. (0.3) mutta sitten (.) toisaalta
is that leadership talk@ supposed to ↑be. (0.3) but then (.) on the
- 08 niin kun (.) siitä on tullut <tietoiseksi> (.) ja sitä on paljon
other hand once (.) one has become <aware> of that (.) and has had
- 09 joutunu (.) joutunu pohtimaan (0.3) .hh niin sitä mä (.) toivon et
to (.) has had to reflect it a lot (0.3) .hh so what I (.) hope is
- 10 se on sellanen asia jonka tekin viette sinne kouluihin
that it is a kind of thing that you will also take to the schools
- 11 (0.4) mukananne (.) et sil johtamispuheella et minkälainen niinku (.)
(0.4) with you (.) that the leadership talk like what kind of (.)
- 12 merkitys me asioille annetaan mitä me puhutaan ja missä me puhutaan
meaning we give to things what we talk and where we talk
- 13 (0.3) se on äärimmäisen tärkeä asia.
(0.3) is really important.

One of the managers answers the question by mentioning “leadership talk” as one of the core themes of the training (line 5). In her turn, she refers back to her past, claiming a special relation to this notion and confessing that her prior experiences have guided her attitudes towards the training’s focus on language and communication, making her “annoyed” (lines 4–7). To concretize this, the manager quotes her thoughts during the training (lines 6–7). The direct quotation is produced with a changed voice quality that could be seen to display the emotional state of agitation and contempt. In this way, the quotation strategically reconstructs the earlier interactional situation (cf. Holt 2000) and construes the authenticity of the account: her emotions really were like this during the earlier

phases of the training. After that, the manager contrasts them with her current understanding (lines 7–9) that has developed during the training. Rhetorically, this factualizes the importance of “leadership talk” effectively as it shows that the person producing a positive assessment has herself changed her mind about the matter under discussion and the assessment is thus detached from her interests (cf. Potter 1996). At the same time, the manager positions herself in the same membership category of “trainees” with the steering group members and voices their potential doubt, thus pre-empting potential resistance and instructing the steering groups to exercise the new ideas in their everyday working life (lines 9–11). Therefore, the outside observer’s testimonials finally seal and legitimize the whole training program and verify for all the parties involved that its goals have been met and the effort put in it has been justifiable.

5 Conclusion

In this article, we have studied the commodification of language and communication in the context of organizational consulting. The aim of the article was to examine how the role of language and communication in contemporary working life is presented in consultant-led training activities and how the activities thus construe language and communication as sellable items for the purposes of the consulting enterprise. In our analysis, we focused on three salient interactional activities and showed how they factualize various language and communication related social phenomena and construct causal relations between organizational success and the ability to assess and modify one’s own communicative behavior. First, the *consultant’s lecture*, which typically opens up the training day, functions to construct the “transformation of work” – from simple and hierarchical to complex and networked – as an external fact that creates a major challenge for organizations and necessitates the according transformation of language use and interactional practices. Second, through *group assignments* in which the trainees reflect upon their communicative practices, this general necessity is translated into morally obligatory professional goals, the core of which is the continuous willingness to improve through collective reflection and adjustment of communicative behavior. Third, the activity of *sharing of thoughts* through testimonials works to affirm that change in language use and interactional practices is in fact occurring as a result of the training and that participants recognize its importance for securing organizational success.

These activities work to construct for the training an overall rhetorical ethos of inevitability that, due to its definitional nature, has a circular tendency: the factalized transformation of work denotes the necessity of transforming communication practices, and the transformation of communication practices – with the associated transformation of communicating subjects – denotes organizational change and, indeed, transformation of work. It may be induced that a central communicative purpose of the training is to facilitate this progression through subtly “revealing”, or helping participants to realize, the communicative and constructed nature of organizational phenomena and the linkage of communicative and organizational change. Hence, the value of the consulting service rests on mediating this constructionist conversion, after which it is the organization’s task to put it in practice in daily organizational life.

Our paper has shown how the shift to knowledge and innovation economy has created new sites and forms for the commodification and policing of language and communication in workplace contexts. As the focus of organization and management theories has shifted towards promoting embeddedness, reflexivity, and relationships, it has become increasingly difficult to justify efforts that explicitly aim at standardizing language use. However, we argue that the business of organizational consulting still depends crucially on the technologization of discourse that is – if not entirely “manageable” anymore – at least refinable and reflectable in ways that are not available to all organizational members without expert consultant help. As we have shown, the solution to the technologization of discourse in the post industrial age of knowledge and innovation economy is to refine the product and to move from explicit instructions on “how to communicate” towards tools for practicing language awareness and reflecting one’s own communicative practices. At the same time, the consulting has had to realign organizational goals and criteria of success from productivity to creativity and continuous development.

From the viewpoint, the organizational consulting programs can be seen both as the indicators of and vehicles for social change. They are the creation of their time and respond to changes in society and working life, forming close connections between management theory and other academic research, media discourse as well as organizational and societal policy-making where changing working life and new economies are frequently discussed. In this way, they also discursively produce these new worlds of work and form a self-reinforcing cycle, introducing new norms and ideals, extending normativity from behavior to subjectivity and the self(-in-relation-to-others), and thus creating new language and communication related positions and orders.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
↑	Rise in pitch
<u>word</u>	Emphasis
>word<	Faster pace than surrounding talk
<word>	Slower pace than surrounding talk
wo-	Word cut off
@word@	Change in sound quality
\$word\$	Smiley voice
.hh	Inbreath
hh	Outbreath
heh	Laughter
(0.5)	Pause in seconds
(.)	Micropause: less than 0.2 s
[Beginning of overlapping talk
*	Beginning of embodied action
POINTS	Embodied action
(word)	Talk not clear
(-)	Talk not heard
((words omitted))	Transcriber's remarks

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