

THE RHETORIC OF OPPRESSION IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

Many corporations maintain that people are their most important asset, to be valued and encouraged to be creative. In numerous companies, though, such discourse is not backed by actions – in such organizations, employees are in fact considered expendable articles whose main motivation is to stay employed. Creative deeds of workers, like propositions of new methods, often disturb established interests that work to repress the creative individual. The image (ethos) that such corporations project through both communications to the external public and official words to the internal public; the logic (logos) of short-term profits plus the feelings (pathos) stemming from individual interests of those who have some measure of power constitute the discourse of oppression in the workplace. Such discourse was the object of rhetorical analysis using interviews with middle managers in the Brazilian branches of four multinational organizations of American origin. The study concludes that in most cases oppression discourse in the workplace, unlike the classical wolf speech in La Fontaine's fable, is not aimed at a justification (logos); rather it is blunt, undisguised power-based pathos. Middle managers interviewed also revealed that a relatively subtle manifestation of oppression is pervasive: overwhelming workloads leave workers helpless to set priorities.

The Ethos of Modern Corporations

The current discourse of most organizations presents people as their "greatest asset." As a consequence, corporations should treat their employees as important resources, would pay due attention to their needs and motivations and encourage them to be creative. The image (ethos) that the organizations try to project is constructed by the discourse to the external public and in formal statements to the internal public. However, the logic (logos) of quick profits (especially in times of crisis), plus the feelings (pathos) of individuals who hold some measure of power and perceive threats to their interests are translated into a different type of discourse – the discourse of oppression in the workplace.

This paper proposes to investigate instances of everyday discourse in organizations contributing to the exertion of power, undue domination or abuse. In simple words, in what way discourse in those instances appears as oppressive. A theoretical study centered on discourse analysis provided the tools to examine the results of a qualitative research conducted among middle managers of four multinational corporations.

Rhetoric in Organizational Discourse

It is necessary to establish what is understood as discourse. It is not an easy-to-grasp concept, since there are many definitions, sometimes contradictory. Fairclough (2001 p.21) proposes three possibilities of linguistic understanding of discourse. 1) Used in reference to spoken dialog, as opposed to written text. For example, turn taking in conversational openings or closings. 2) More commonly, concerning enlarged samples of spoken or written language. This sense of discourse gives special attention to interaction between speaker and listener or writer and reader, and consequently between processes of production/interpretation and to situational contexts of linguistic usage. An example lies in a newspaper story, which needs an interaction between writer and reader. 3) Related to different types of language in different types of social situations. Examples are: journalistic, classroom, advertising and corporate discourse.

Beyond that purely linguistic approach, Fairclough (2001 p.21) reminds us that discourse is widely used in social theory and analysis as it refers to “different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice”. This provides deeper view and understanding: discourse not only reflects and represents social entities and relationships, but also and perhaps more important, constructs and establishes them. In the medical field, for example, the scientific discourse is dominant between practitioners, but when a doctor addresses a patient, he has a different, more understandable discourse dictated by social needs. A similar situation occurs in the legal profession.

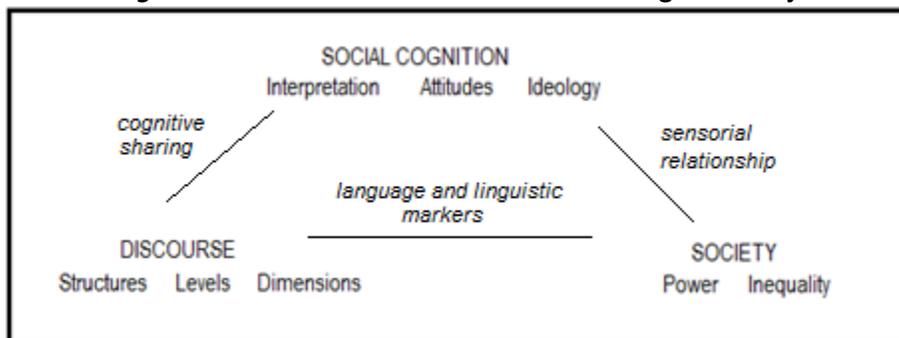
It should also be considered that discourse is more than oral or written expression, but incorporates a combination of practices. Elements other than words, for example, are considered: circumstances of discourse production, social status of the individual that articulates the discourse and even physical posture and gestures that develop along the text. This paper considers discourse within a multidimensional conception of language: textual, social, interactional, symbolic, and ideological.

Fairclough (2001, p. 25) also reminds that corporations, since the last quarter of the twentieth century, have been through important changes, including growing investment in human resources. In theory, workers became more than parts of a machine, but individuals from whom to expect more than the performing of repetitive tasks. Fairclough (2001, p.26) asserts that the change in corporate culture is not merely rhetorical: “... the aim is new cultural values, workers who are ‘enterprising’, self-motivating, and [...] self-steering”. Since the use of language acquires more importance as means of production and of social control, it is expected that workers become more involved with the corporation as a group or social body both as listeners and speakers. Fairclough (1996) also considers such changes transnational: new styles of administration spread, imported from successful countries and applied internationally.

Another discourse analyst, van Dijk, has a less optimistic view, though Fairclough’s definitions of discourse are consistent with his work. Van Dijk (2001) sees discourse as a tool of power. Since the powerful – like politicians, CEOs and even, to some extent, teachers and doctors – are people who control public discourse, the study of discourse helps to understand how domination works. According to van Dijk, such control does not happen through imposition of rulings that would force individuals into becoming merely productive machines. To the contrary, it is a discursive control by means of persuasion, the most effective way to exert power. By means of control of intentions, one controls acts and the main tool for that is discourse.

In order to explain this phenomenon, van Dijk considers three cornerstones: social cognition, which includes interpretation, attitudes and ideology; discourse, along with its structures, levels and dimensions; and society, which includes both power and inequality. When social relationships of gender and class are not uniform, one could expect a direct association between social and individual structures of discourse. However, according to van Dijk, there is no simple connection between power, domination, inequality and individual discourse. There is a complex web of correlations that includes individual, social and cultural knowledge and an indirect association that could be called a sensorial relationship. Van Dijk explains that dominating groups are conscious that a control of mental structures of individuals is necessary to have power over their acts and associations. This is done through language and linguistic markers known by both dominant and dominated. The existence of cognitive sharing it is necessary to domination. The implications of this theory to the study of corporate discourse are shown within the analysis of the pieces of discourse examined in a later section of this paper.

Figure 1. Cornerstones of Discourse According to van Dijk



Beyond analyzing shared knowledge, existing hierarchical relations between dominant and dominated groups plus the exercise of discourse, it is necessary to examine the rhetorical proofs: ethos, pathos and logos, organized by Aristotle and studied by many other philosophers and theoreticians. Such concepts reinforce the theories mentioned before in this paper. The rhetorical capacity of convince and/or persuade within corporations by means of discourse and rhetorical proofs is directly connected to the theories developed by Fairclough (adaptation to changes) and Van Dijk (power and inequality).

Discourse is always a prime way of constructing and reinforcing ethos (image) of the organization. Organizational discourse, since it has to be based on facts in order to convey credibility, should contemplate logos (objectivity and transparency). The observation that such discourse can eventually be oppressive indicates situations that strongly involve pathos (feelings and emotions). This set of facts and circumstances points to the construction, at least in part of the organizations, of two distinct ethe: one of concern for employee well-being (shown to society in general) and other of imposition of power. The discourse that constructs the power/inequality ethos is directed to a specific public: the oppressed employees.

Meyer (2007, p. 25), reinforces Aristotelian concepts deeming rhetoric the “negotiation of differences (or symbolic distances) between orator and audience”. That difference can be social, political, ideological, intellectual or ethical. Oppression can, according to Meyer’s framework, be considered as the mini-

mization of negotiation leading to maximization of distance. Ethical differences are particularly important in this case: orator ethics may differ from listener ethics.

To study pathos, another look of Meyer's work is suitable. He deepens rhetorical proofs considering that ethos cannot be identified solely with the orator's character, as stated by Aristotle: words are structured in a more complex way than the construction of character. Meyer wrote (2007, p. 35):

Ethos is a domain, a level, a structure – in short, a dimension – not limited to whomever personally speaks to an audience or even to an author who hides himself behind a text and whose 'presence', for that reason, matters very little.

Such statement reinforces the concept of ethos as complex and deepens analysis. Corporate discourse is in this case established as collective (not limited to one speaker and one listener) and ethos understood as a structure that contains those differences that are to be negotiated.

The concept of pathos in Meyer's theory (2007) is also an evolution of Aristotle's. Meyer points pathos as a source of questioning by the audience. The questions relate to interests established by passion (in the rhetoric sense): emotions and opinions. Within such framework, it is possible to associate pathos to the subjectivity present in organizational discourse. The questions arisen by pathos contribute to a deeper understanding of organizational discourse. According to Meyer, passion is also a judgment on what questioning is about: the question becomes an answer and raises other questions. In other words, the desire to clarify discourse is passion. Therefore, rhetoric passion becomes useful as it mobilizes the audience to respond favorably to a proposition through a fabricated identity of viewpoints. Oppression, then, would be the absence of the possibility of replies, despite the permanence of the desire to question.

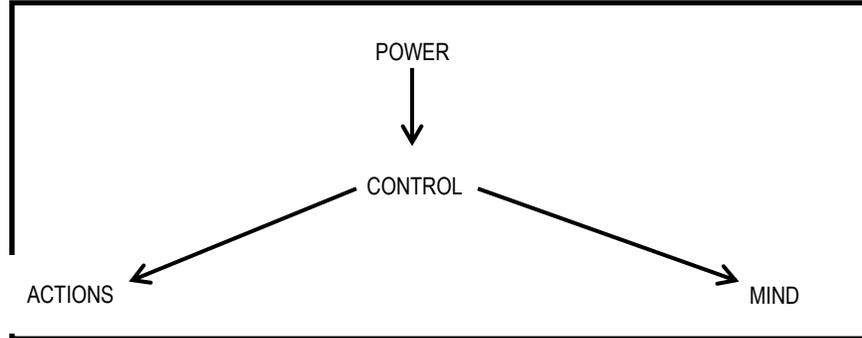
Logos, since it is connected to objective attributes of corporate discourse, should be able to express questions and answers while keeping its difference from pathos. The answers, in this case, make the questions disappear, what means that logos, according to Meyer (2007, p. 40) is near the "apocritical-problematological homonym", which occurs when the answer does not raise other questions and the argument is finished. This is the very basis of the rhetoric of corporate discourse based on facts. Oppressive discourse possesses a distinct feature: argument is finished not because new questions are unnecessary, but because they are in some way forbidden.

Power and Oppression in the Corporate World

As per van Dijk, the notion of power is based upon two foundations: actions and the minds of individuals. In other words, to mention power is to mention control, or the capacity to limit freedom of action, in the Weberian sense: power is the ability to convince an individual who wishes otherwise to act according to the orator's will or the ability to convince that individual to do something he would not do in other circumstance.

Figure 2 illustrates that power, through control, dominates mind and/or actions. Oppression is basically the domination of actions regardless of the mindset of the oppressed.

Figure 2: Power and its Developments According to van Dijk



It is interesting to note that Fairclough (2001, p.31), though maintaining that organizational culture has a new socially-oriented discourse concerned with the employee, admits differences between critical discourse analysis, which explores the role of discourse structures in constituting social inequality, and traditional discourse analysis, concerned with textual aspects. Furthermore, he admits that those differences are not sharp enough to avoid a grey area. Summarizing these thoughts, Fairclough wrote that “discourse is molded by power relations and ideologies”. Here the otherwise conflicting propositions of Fairclough and van Dijk do converge – both think of discourse as social, not merely textual.

These theoretical issues can be illustrated by investigating to what extent corporate discourse may limit the actions of employees and by discussing hegemony and power relations within corporations. According to Paula (2009) oppression and resistance cases have appeared marginally in organizational studies – the existence of a hegemonic thought can be identified here. The leading organizational discourse understands the strategic dimension of communication as focused not on social issues, but on the processes of transferring information. There is a difficulty in separating the purpose of contributing to organization business (main objective of the strategic dimension) from practicality of studies and conclusions. This study does not explore surveys of job satisfaction for the sake of focus, though oppression is certainly an issue in job satisfaction.

Theoreticians use two basic interpretations of domination as expressed in organizational discourse:

1. Functionalist: the exercise of power is necessary – actions outside official structures can threaten corporate objectives and must be repressed.
2. Critical: power is domination – therefore, domination determines the processes under which power is legitimated as organizational structures. Power creates barriers that make workers’ participation difficult,

There are a number of means to exert corporate control: direct, based on surveillance; technical, exerted through technology and machines; bureaucratic, based on rules. Depending on the situation, all of those are operative, one way or another. However, discursive control is the most effective, since it can occur subjectively and may even go unnoticed.

Foucault (2003) comments that the capitalist regime established in the nineteenth century could not transform work directly into profit and were forced to create a network of techniques to attach people to work: bodies, time and strength are turned into what the author calls *overprofit*, that implies the existence of a *subpower*, a microscopic political power operated by authority. The creation of subpower gives origin to ways of knowledge that multiply themselves, make human sciences advance and place man as their object. They are the framework of individual knowledge, the knowledge of standardization and knowledge on how to correct things when they go wrong. In other words, the association between power and knowledge has its origins more in the means of production than in the very existence of man. Examples are Adam Smith and his market's invisible hand and Weberian analysis of modernity (Tyler, 2006). For an economic model to survive, power and the knowledge which supports production relationships are both necessary.

Foucault (1979) reminded that power is exerted in societies not only by governments and authorities but in many diverse ways. In 2003 Foucault was more specific, writing about the so-called selection process, essential to corporate survival: organizations must continuously select who and what attitudes are going to be punished or rewarded, who is going to be promoted and who is going to be fired. Such process legitimates control and is related to the system of reward and punishment, widely used in corporations and classifiable as oppressive.

Perelman (1958), the philosopher who developed the Treatise on Argumentation, used Aristotelian concepts as the basis for his work, which is very useful for rhetorical analysis. He proposed three categories of arguments. 1) quasi-logical, which follow the structure of mathematical reasoning but are not demonstrations. 2) based on the structure of reality, which deals with associations of succession (phenomena of the same level - an example is the argument of authority) and associations of coexistence (phenomena of different levels). 3) arguments that establish the structure of reality (example, model, illustration). To expand on these notions or even to give the complete list is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth mentioning that the argument of authority is widely used in the oppressor's discourse.

Corporate discourse is not by any means limited to written text, but is in large part based on the spoken word, what adds complexity to it, since the same text can have different meanings depending on the way it is said. The persuasive domain can be defined, as per van Dijk, as mind control. The exercise of power by way of talk, as in instructions, directions, warnings and threats fits perfectly in the discursive domain. In order to exert power one must have knowledge both of discursive and interactional mechanisms – such knowledge is obtained by observation of situational models and devising of patterns, which include attitudes and values of the audience. Models can be corporate-specific and involve intonation, pronunciation, word order, rhetoric figures, syllogisms and logical fallacies – spoken discourse is far more at ease than written text to use all those devices.

After all, the corporation possesses power through managerial control. It is more or less clear to the vast majority of people involved in organizations that hierarchy and domination are necessary, since not everyone has the ability and the competence to decide what is best in corporate situations. The approach to apply such power may vary between organizational contexts and is subject to debate and study. It is usual, for instance, that managers associate their discourse to negative consequences in order to obtain cooperation: loss of competitiveness, unfavorable balance sheets, and layoffs are examples of negative consequences. On the other side, employees do not in general publically voice their complaints for fear of losing their jobs.

Theory and considerations make clear that corporate discourse within organizations has a dominant orator and a dominated audience. Orator and the audience will differ, depending upon specific contexts. For example, management may be associated with the orator. But lower echelons of management may also serve as the audience, being dominated -- or influenced -- by upper levels of management. Whatever the context within corporations, it is interesting to examine how the dominated feel and what is the actual shape of the oppressors' discourse.

Oppressor's Discourse and the Viewpoint of the Oppressed

The theory herein presented shows that oppression is present in at least part of the corporations. In order to obtain actual samples of the oppressive discourse and comments by the employees, a qualitative research was conducted. The purpose was to examine how logos, ethos and pathos are represented in the oppressive discourse and how the domination is exerted discourse-wise. The methodological location was selected looking for a representative sample of employees in general. The interviewees were middle managers of four Brazilian branches of US-headquartered multinational corporations. Middle managers are exactly that: the middle. Since they also are in a position to oppress, they can distinguish between oppression and legitimate pressure. Branches of American large corporations located in emerging countries are influenced by the cultures of both the country of origin and the country where they are located.

Due to the promise of confidentiality and to the fact that academic research was being conducted, more than 90% of the middle managers were interviewed, without opposition from them or from high management. Middle managers were coded by specific functions, like accounting or engineering, and by number of years in the job.

Two questions were presented:

1. Have you ever felt oppressed by words of a hierarchical superior while with this company? (Employees were not asked to define oppression or had oppression defined to them, since middle managers are supposed to know what it is).
2. If so, what were those words?

When applying the interviews, a couple of surprises showed up. A significant amount of middle managers (close to one-third) voluntarily mentioned as oppression the pressure from multiple tasks causing inability to set priorities. More unexpected was the eagerness of more than half of the interviewees to reply and provide details (country culture may have played a role in that). This happened in all four corporations, regardless of specific functions and number of years in the job.

80% is the rounded percentage of the middle managers interviewed who reported being, in some point of their careers, affected by leaders perceived as tyrannical. In general, the words quoted show an oppressor's discourse dominated by pathos – more often than not, oppression produces blunt sentences, with no concern for logos (justification of attitudes), as in the samples presented at the end of this section. Whenever the discourse was more considerate, managers used quasi-logical arguments, as studied by Perelman.

The double ethos also appeared: all four corporations, in their websites, do not give a clue that such discourse may be practiced by their upper management when dealing with employees. It must be reminded that the discursive domain supposes that interactional mechanisms are known by both parties, orator and audience, corporation and employees. In other words, only one side of the supposedly oppressive situation was heard. Finally, function and number of years as manager did not show any measurable influence on results,

Statements and dialogs obtained in the course of the interviews show objectively the discourse of domination.

Situation 1:

Higher manager: "You didn't complete that assignment. Those things have to be done quickly! And you didn't finish the task assigned to you on Monday, either, which is urgent. Why all the delays?"

Middle manager: "My team is small, and it is impossible to do all of those things at the same time without loss of quality".

Higher manager: "Your colleague X, who has a team just as small, does manage to accomplish all his tasks at the right time."

This conversation is definitely oppressive. The higher manager shows control over acts and mind of his subordinate, as conceptualized by van Dijk. Such control limits the freedom of action of the middle manager who cannot set priorities since all tasks are considered urgent. The oppressor's ethos reflects an authoritarian individual, who allows no space for replies or questioning. In this case, there is no negotiation between orator and listener, like presented by Meyer (2007), and the discourse is shaped by power relations, as theorized by van Dijk. The exercise of power agrees with Foucault (2003), who pictures a man enslaved at work. As there is no space for a reply, there are no alternatives to obedience. The higher manager does not regard the employee as a person, nor has a socially-oriented vision.

The negotiation of distances conceived by Meyer (2007) simply disappears. Arguments, according to Perelman's classification, are based on the structure of reality (first sentence) and quasi-logical (second sentence) when he shows some reasoning when comparing the listener's competence to his colleague's.

Situation 2:

Middle manager: "I believe you received my e-mail about the complexity of the assignment and why it is impossible to have it ready so soon".

Higher manager: "I did not even bother to read your litany. Your time ends next Tuesday"

The text, though very short, indicates a piece of oppressive discourse. The middle manager might be receiving pressure to have the work done, but he does not take the time to explain to the employee and simply resorted to his authority. In this situation the higher manager uses what Perelman (1976) calls the argument of authority. There is no explicit imperative (do as I say), but the implicit command is unequivocal. There is no possible doubt concerning the oppressive character of the statement, since the

middle manager has no option but doing as he is told. The oppression in this case is essentially rhetorical: there are no certainties, only assumptions – what will happen to the middle manager if he does not follow the order is not clear. In the dialog shown, there are no indications of what Fairclough (2001) believes is happening in corporations, the attempt to transform work relationships in a healthy way, the evolution of corporate culture.

Situation 3:

Middle manager: “We need a computerized system to manage documents. It occurs very often that two different professionals work in different versions of the same document and this causes the company to lose time and money.”

Vice-President: “We don’t need software; we need people to organize their work better.”

Middle manager: “But the mistake I mentioned was made exactly by our most careful professional.”

Vice-President: “You are not paid to have ideas; you are paid to do as I tell you.”

The middle manager tried a logical argumentation (Perelman & Tyteca, 1990). The reaction of the Vice-President was, again, to put an end to discussion with the irrefutable argument of authority: “you are paid to do as I tell you”. Nothing can be done against such argument, as it is typical of oppressive discourse. It is interesting to note that, as in Situation 2, the statement appears entirely objective but it is actually subjective: “since you are paid to do as I tell you, if you fail to act accordingly, you will be fired”.

Very often oppressive discourse is practiced in corporations with the rationale that the company must produce a profit. That is the case of the last situation examined.

Situation 3:

Higher manager to middle management trainee: “This is the third time you take a coffee break this morning. You are stealing that time from the corporation!”

The text is both oppressive and offensive. It illustrates the strength of words when associated with duties of employees of any level. The text exemplifies once again the argument of authority, in this case to make an accusation.

Conclusion

Corporate discourse to the external public conveys the idea that business is going, in the last few decades, through a major process of change. This change includes restructuring of work relationships and placing more value on the individual employee, as theorized by Fairclough in 1993. When the company deems the individual employee a partner, it proposes a new vision of itself. The ethos of a coercive, profit-hungry and domineering organization is softened and the discourse of oppression is partially undone. A new ethos appears, of a company concerned with the well-being of its employees and striving to be positive in many respects to society.

Everyday practice, however, often falls short of these promises. Van Dijk, in 2003, saw work relations as relations of power. According to his way of thinking, submission and obedience are easier to obtain if everyone, truly or not, feels he or she is part of the process of decision-making. The everyday discourse may be different: in many corporations there are constant threats to the self-esteem of workers and the ever-present menace of job termination. Individual employees in those organizations are under continual pressure to demonstrate competence, good performance and usefulness. Sadly, “people are our greatest asset” is in many cases simply an intentional fallacy, part of a strategy to deepen commitment by the individual and to create a favorable image to the external public. Discourse analysis shows that oppression is still present in the workplace.

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