DISCOURSE AS THE MEANS OF COMMUNITY CREATION

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The concept of "discourse communities" has wide use in education and linguistics, but much less so in studies of organizing. We would like to propagate the term in the context of organizing, relating to Foucault's insights showing that discourses create not only their objects, but also their users, in the sense that it can both create and dissolve boundaries around a discourse community. This paper follows grounded theory logic starting with a case of an attempt to create a new discourse community in place of an existing one. Following is a case of the creation of discourse community around a product development project, thereby connecting different communities of practice but excluding the same members that felt marginal in the original discourse communities. The third case is similar to the second in that it shows two existing discourse communities that attempt to merge through the creation of a common discourse, but reproduce the old exclusion patterns. Together, the cases demonstrate how discourse is used to create renewal and inclusion, but as often as not it recreates the traditional patterns of exclusion.

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**Communities of discourse**

The notion of "discourse communities" or "discursive communities" is widely used in education, especially in language teaching, linguistic and genre theory, and reception studies. A common definition would be: "groups in which expression of thought, either written or spoken, share characteristics of vocabulary, communicative intent, subject matter, form of presentation, etc."\(^2\) The problems begin with "etc". One of the more common usages equates discourse communities with interpretative communities (a term coined by Stanley Fish, 1980); both John Swales (1990) and Linda Hutcheon (1995) start from this premise. Studies of organizing could certainly benefit from an adoption of this term, but not in the sense of interpretative communities: as we demonstrate in this paper, discourse communities transgress the barriers of communities of practice, but are not identical to interpretative communities. Whether virtual or interactional, they fully permit the possibility that their members interpret the meaning of the discourse in many different ways. Instead of separating the people and alienating them from each other, this polysemy accompanying the homogenization of the form is most likely what holds the community together.

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One of our starting points has been the study conducted by Hervé Corvellec (1997) who opened his book with a following scene:

Imagine an international meeting between an English, a French, and a Swedish manager, all division heads in a large multinational company. The conversation takes place in English, which is the company language. All of them are well acquainted with the others' functions and the activity within their divisions, and they share a common experience of the company reporting system. Competition in their sector is intense. The headquarters are very demanding, and performance is at the heart of their concerns (Corvellec, 1997:9, our italics).

Corvellec then conducted an etymological study of the term "performance" in English, French, and Swedish, and reviewed the meaning of the term in management texts. As a result, he projected three possible interpretations. The French manager comprehends the term in a more positive way than the English manager does – as an outstanding achievement. The Swedish manager understands performance as being the results that are achieved in the division. The French manager accepts this meaning, exaggerating its evaluative potential. The two managers both reduce and inflate the meaning of the term, and if the English manager notices, it is not until much later. The English manager, trying to be ironic, evokes the theatrical dimension of a recent investment decision. The two other miss the irony completely, believing that the English manager sees the investment as an amazing achievement for the division.

What is interesting, says Corvellec is that the managers will probably continue their discussion without noticing the misunderstanding, and will return to their divisions and give three different accounts of the meeting. We might speculate that there will be one common element, however: they will all be convinced that the notion of performance allows them to measure the company's progress in an objective, precise, and informative way. They are part of what Salskov-Iversen et al.
(2000) called *transnational discourse community*, a community which extends even the borders of their transnational corporation – they are believers in performance.

Are they pathetically deluded? Not necessarily.

The interest in discourse turned the attention of communication studies away from the mechanical model of information transfer, with its three heroes – "the sender", "the addressee", and "the message" – and its villain, "the noise". In this model, perfect communication was assumed to occur when the message sent by the sender arrived at the addressee in its identical form. As pointed out by Umberto Eco (1979), such a theory assumes that the information carried by a message is the negative of entropy and is equivalent to meaning. Accordingly, language is an order (a code) imposed on the disorder of noise. Consequently, reiteration (redundancy) increases the possibility of the message being received and understood. Herein lies the hitch: "the very order which allows a message to be understood is also what makes it absolutely predictable – that is, extremely banal. The more ordered and comprehensive a message, the more predictable it is" (1979: 5).

In a real interaction situation (as opposed to a machine simulation), information is *additive*: its value depends on its novelty to the receiver. Information that is perfectly understandable is old information. The new text, on the other hand, cannot be interpreted according to previously accepted rules; its meaning is uncertain. It requires new interpretations, and new interpretations tend to be called *misunderstandings*. In time, some of these interpretations may win over others and acquire legitimacy; a new order is established and the information becomes predictable. Temporarily, however, meaning and information are opposed to each other. It is ambiguity that makes the world go on; perfect information is redundant. George Steiner takes its reasoning to the extreme claiming that mistranslation is a source of human creativity: The Tower of Babel is a frustrating situation but, he says, perhaps the good solution is pidgin rather than Pentecost (1975/1992: 495).
In the following, we are not going to investigate the question of meaning construction; we shall limit ourselves to the definition of the discourse community quoted above, precisely because it refuses to engage in this issue. We shall assume that polysemy is not a hindrance to a community construction; instead, we shall point out other complications emerging in the situations of community construction via discourse in organizational settings.

Do you speak English? The reform of Swedish Rail

The Swedish government, following the example of many others, decided to end the state monopoly on railways, mail services, and energy production and distribution. The respective domains were to be put on the market and privatized. The main purpose was to increase their efficiency through open competition.

Swedish Rail has a 150-year history and is used to repetitive reforms in which the problems are always the same – low income, high costs, and accusations of bad service – whereas solutions vary according to the fashion of the day. Such a new reform project was initiated in 1998 in the Machine Division, under the auspices of the political support for competition and the market forces. New managers were recruited and new consultants engaged. Many of the consultants were from UK (the country that was successful, or, some say, unsuccessful at being the first in Europe to privatize its railways) and they did not speak Swedish. As it turned out, this defect was turned into a resource.

The project was called "T 2000" (Technique 2000) and consisted of 10 subprojects. Each subproject had a "champion" (line manager responsible for a cost center), an internal project leader, one or more external consultants, and a number of project members who were seconded from various departments. Such projects took two to three years to complete. Maria Tullberg was given the opportunity to follow one of the larger subprojects and coordination activities (among subprojects and
between project teams and line managers). Beside ordinary management meetings, two new settings were established: the Joint Team and the Grand Manager Meetings. Here are excerpts from her fieldnotes taken during three different meetings (Tullberg, 2000; English terms that were used in the original Swedish text are indicated by bold type).

**Joint Team:**

Once a month the representatives of all ten subprojects meet to report and discuss their projects, which usually takes about four hours. They call themselves the Joint Team. It is here that "the new" is to be born. The meetings are highly structured with a structure introduced by the English consultants. 

Here is an agenda: **Expectations** (at this meeting), **Next step** (follow-up from the previous meeting), **Reports** (from every project; a list of new **Next steps** is made during the presentation), **Risk management**, and other, for instance **Social events, Temperature check** (check of the progress, and/or planning of the next check), and **Bs and Cs** (**Benefits and Concerns** – evaluation of the meeting). The representatives of Swedish Rail are strikingly young in contrast to the average age of the employees; at these meetings it is primarily the consultants who are older than 35.

It is worthy of mention that the setting of meetings at Swedish Rail are typically quite modest: coffee and gingerbread biscuits, black-and-white transparencies, and cramped meeting rooms. Joint Team has fresh fruit, mineral water, sandwiches, and color transparencies; the meetings take place in a well equipped conference room with comfortable armchairs. At the first meeting, the clothing is highly differentiated: one group in jeans, one in suits and white shirts. The latter group speaks only English. To me, all these nonverbal signals speak also: they say "We represent the modern, the new, that which is typical in private companies – we are, dress, speak, think and act differently".

Each meeting is chaired by a **facilitator**, a role that shifts among the members; it is only at the first meeting that the English consultant serves as facilitator.
Everybody in the project team has taken courses in project work and meeting technique, organized by the consulting company. Conversation takes place in English, with some Swedish additions. Walls are covered with sheets of paper. Each project is described in terms of goals, objectives, main activities, milestones, time schedules, and names of responsible persons. The titles of various sheets are Critical Path, Benefit Tracking, Risk Register, Depot Pilot, Material Management, Support Service, Customer Processes. (Tullberg, 2000: 163-164).

The second meeting took place a month later, in the same room.

Many consultants, fewer white shirts among them. A local adaptation? New facilitator on the podium, young, enthusiastic.
Facilitator: What are the expectations concerning this meeting?
A voice from the audience: Sandwiches!
Another voice from the audience: Where do we stand on Benefit Tracks? (pp. 166-167)

Much later, a meeting of top managers within the Depot Pilot (a sub-project):

Maria (reacting to the number of suits and white shirts among Swedish participants): How elegant you are nowadays!
Bertil: We advance don't we? (laughs). (p.202)

The last observed meeting of the Joint Team was held together with the line managers, and therefore it was called The Great Managers Meeting:

Dave summarizes T 2000 and shares his reflections concerning the project. He begins by asking everybody who has changed jobs during the last two years to
stand up. Almost everyone stands up. Dave puts on a transparency with text and a picture of smiling faces:

"The programme has been a major success. 318 mkr reduction achieved. The last PIQ indicated a significant change in mindset."

Cost reduction was a priority, he says, but T 2000 was a road towards a completely new company, characterized by:

"Business thinking
Attractive jobs
Continuous change"

He continues presenting the result of a survey concerning the perception of T 2000:

"T 2000 has impressed, pleased, and surprised the business on a number of dimensions:

Amazed about the breadth and the ambition.
Initial resistance to consultants went away.
A cultural revolution – the war between P and M [two divisions] is over.
Well working project teams with power and commitment."

Time for the directions for the future:

Focus on measurement process.
KPIs [konsumentprisindex, Consumer Price Index] and reviews – keep an eye on the ball.
Walk the talk, lead by example, think about behaviours.
Continue the policy of openness and honesty.

I look around. The audience seems very pleased and Dave receives a long, warm applause. On the way home by bus, I am chatting with a line manager:

The line manager: Thank God we didn't have any consultants at our place. Everybody thinks it's extremely ridiculous, all these rules, and Bs and Cs. All this talk about targets and change power makes people fall asleep in their chairs.

Maria: But those 318 million kronor that have been saved. Was this new? Is this on the top of what has been saved before? Shouldn't the focus be on KPI and price per kilometer? They said nothing about it? And nobody asked?
The line manager (smiling): No, the old guys know what is what. One is not supposed to ask. Those 318 million could be anything, nobody knows and nobody is going to know what it is. You are right – the savings were supposedly well defined in kind, but nobody talks about them now. (pp. 230-231)

A great success or a big flop, ridiculed by the employees? Could it be both? Like the suits and white shirts, the self-defined identity of the Joint Team has spread widely within Swedish Rail, whether the reaction was derision or admiration. The team itself worked hard to circulate an image of "those who know, and who are able to introduce new ways". A counter-image of "the other" helped to construct their own difference:

"The old guard, other managers, are old-fashioned and keen on protecting their own domains. We are different: we collaborate and help one another". It is worth mentioning that the irony and the distancing with which their self-promotion was met have been unofficial. Ironic comments were made in private, as the meetings were not designed for questions; some jokers wanted sandwiches, but others wanted the position on the Benefit Tracks, the number of white shirts decreased and then increased. All in all, it is good to remember what Kurt Vonnegut says in Mother Night: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be".

**Discursivity of the "new"**

As we see it (and as the members themselves said), the Joint Team was constructed to serve as a symbol and a model for the "new" Swedish Rail. The change of language – where the literal change of language solved a practical problem and served a symbolic function – was strengthened and accompanied by changes in style: the style of the meetings, the style of the surroundings, and the dress code. One could say, pointing to

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3 On identity and alterity interplay in image construction, see Czarniawska, 2002.
these latter changes, that we are stretching the understanding of a discourse too far –
to which we respond with Barthes' words:

>The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a
prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different
substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be
carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images,
gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in
myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime,
painting . . . stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation.
(Barthes 1977: 79)

Encouraged by this reasoning, we would like to reverse the argument to suggest not
only that clothes speak, but also that speech can be treated as the symbolic utterance
of a ritual character – that is, irrespective of its content. In this sense, the reform
project at Swedish Rail confirms the observations of Corvellec (1997): it does not
matter how well the Swedish participants understood English expressions. What
matters was that they felt they belonged to a community. Connerton (1989;
Czarniawska, 2002) claims that social memory resides in rituals and bodily practices,
not in individual heads or collective minds. All revolutions start with a change of
ritual and with an introduction of the dress code. It is not so important what is said,
but how it is said. As Vonnegut says, quoting from Thoreau, at the beginning of
*Welcome to the Monkey House*: "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes”.

Framing the use of English as a ritualistic way of introducing change, we
shifted our attention to Volvo Car Corporation (VCC), which was acquired by Ford in
1999. We were counting on observing another example of introducing English as a
way of introducing change in a company. We were wrong. English had been Volvo's
official language for many years, and they had settled into a comfortable "Swenglish"
that might be difficult for foreigners (including those from Ford) to understand, but
not Volvo natives. Our interest paid off, however, revealing other aspects of the creation of communities via discourse.

**A car that is masculine but not macho**

Annica Bragd spent a year at Volvo Car Corporation, following the initial two phases of a product development project – a new SUV (Bragd, 2002). One of the most interesting aspects of this process was how project team managed the project – inside and outside the team – with discursive means.\(^4\)

The most central aspect was the communication of a "master idea" – the presentation of the object of the project's team work. Whereas the idea of "a car that is masculine but not macho" came relatively late in the process – not until the press releases (Bragd, 2002: 1) – the presentation of the "master idea" started at the first "gate", at one of twelve obligatory passage points that a project must pass before it is admitted to production. Here is an excerpt from an observation of a meeting where Business Project Leader (BPL), presents the idea of the new car to 40 people – from the Engineering Department, the Quality Department, and the project team.

The BPL put on an overhead slide, looked around the meeting room and said with pride in his voice: “This is the strategy for our car.” The slide showed a blue-colored sketch of an exterior design model.

“It shows how to produce a car with an SUV approach. We need to sell \[x\] numbers of cars in the USA and to increase the sales volumes worldwide, and of course to be profitable. This is a car, which will be in the all-wheel drive segment, but it is not an SUV through-and-through.” It was quiet in the meeting when he changed slides. He started to read the letter of intent, “…to produce a car with design charisma and to empower the combination of an SUV

\(^4\) Bragd uses in her dissertation the term "verbal team thinking tools".
with a passenger car; this gives the car the base characteristics as flexibility and versatility in the interior”.

“We are the last automotive producers to enter this segment and we are going to develop a car that does not exist in this segment today. This car is going to attract the SUV customers. It should be a sound Volvo car, and apart from including quality, safety, and environmental considerations, it must be right when it comes to driving characteristics and other car characteristics, for instance, the noise level. Design is also very important. IT is very important in these cars, in all cars, but especially in this kind of car. That is why we need to look into this part more closely. There are other cars in this segment and this car should offer opportunities to develop new technical details to use in the next generation of Volvo cars”.

BPL picked up another overhead, showing a positioning chart of competitors. Everybody remained quiet and listened, even though it was becoming hot and stuffy in the room.

The BPL continued: “The car is more oriented towards the family. It can be a big or a small car, due to the flexibility of the interior. The size can be changed by adding or taking away the additional row of passengers, seated facing forwards, at the rear of the car. It is also an all-wheel drive car aimed at the family that needs higher flexibility than other Volvo cars. The customers are… rather young and… about 40.” A new slide was put up, showing a happy couple with two children jumping and running on the beach with a golden retriever dog. The whole family was dressed in causal white cotton trousers, the woman wore an off-white sweater and the man wore a blue jersey and they had all white teeth, happily showed in a broad smile. Under the picture it read: “Volvo–for life”.

“We learned from Ford in the USA last week that their customers’ average age in this segment was around 50 and many women in this segment buy these cars and even more drive them. The customers’ usual family income in this segment is in the region of x US dollars and I can show you this on the next slide”. He put up the next slide presenting the prices, different customer segments, and profitability figures.
“My conclusion is: This car has the possibility to compete. It will have the properties and the quality to compete. The design is very important and the design characteristics are not yet chosen, but they will be selected next week. We have a lot to do when it comes to performance, fuel economy, handling, and perceived quality. (...) We will be building it in a completely new way and this is a challenge in itself, especially for the Engineering Department and for the suppliers. It also requires that we have support for the technical parts that we have not been designing before. We are not a hundred percent sure but we believe that we know, rather well, how to do this. The chaps have been stationed and are ready to work, but we need to finalize several steps first and I will come back to you later. (...) The great challenge now is to find the manpower and the competence to make it possible. He looked at the 36 men and 4 women gathered in the meeting room and ended his presentation.

This was the first of many presentations, and the first draft of the "master-idea", as Bragd (2002: 96-98) called it. It sought to achieve several goals: it created a "we" that would stand for the project team during its work. This "we" was knowledgeable, predominantly male ("chaps", "manpower"), and differentiated from "others" who were supposed to provide support. It created a verbal image of car that did not yet exist, and it sketched a potential target group: a family. This was a message to the outside, but also to the team itself. In time, the members of the project team were as able to present the "master-idea" as well as the BPL. The idea was presented at many different meetings and occasions.

After a while it became clear that the concept of such a versatile car crossed the boundaries of the instructions received, the traditional gate system, ways of working, and the time schedule. It needed to be translated into a "normal engineering job". Thus, the engineers translated and reworked the content of the master idea and delivered it back to the project team in the form of an offer of technical solutions. For instance, one of the translations from the engineers was: "It is going to be a car that
you can use for driving under heavy conditions and driving to a fancy restaurant and to the opera on Saturday night”. The team adopted their presentations accordingly.

Whenever the "master-idea” went out-of-tune with the actual direction of work, the project team had either to adapt it, as in the example above, or to correct it, by communicating the project team’s version. On such occasions, the team members used to say: “The BPL sees it like this” or “That isn’t the dialogue the project wants to have”. The discursive version of the car needed to be attuned to the actual car – but adaptations went both ways.

Other studies of product development projects (Sevón and Kreiner, 1998; Patriotta, 2003b) indicate a frequent use of analogies in mapping the set of transition rules from a known domain into a new domain, a translation of an idea from one domain to another. Such analogies became a powerful co-ordination mechanism as analogies possess a normative value inasmuch as they prescribe and direct the behaviors of actors according to a shared image of the world (Patriotta 2003 a, b). This was also the case at Volvo, where the project team used a newly produced VCC car as a reference. This reference car functioned as an analogy, promoting further reasoning and creating a bridge to the new logic. Other projects served as ad hoc reference points: to say, for example, "We did so in the 90/96 project", served to legitimatize an argument.

As could be expected, stories were the frequent means of establishing the identity – of the car and of the project team. The stories were context-bound, and could be seen primarily as novice educational tools, used by the knowledgeable employees.

These stories were emplotted around the Character of a strong leader. It seems that decisive project leaders, who found a masterly way out of difficult situations, made a strong impression at VCC. Anecdotes, jokes, and anti-hero stories, on the other hand, functioned as catalysts, allowing the listeners to laugh at how things are done at VCC. They also functioned as tranquillizers, creating life as everyone would
like it to be – very complicated and difficult, but quite manageable in the end. In these stories, the engineers fixed the world and made it right. In fact, the engineers in the team carefully cultivated their image as rescuers, poking fun at the finance people, saying things like, "An accountant without an overhead is not a real accountant".

These subcultures had been developed in technical school where the same type of narratives regarding project management circulated. New discourses always feed on old discourses or, as Latour (2004) puts it, local interactions are always distributed.

Perhaps most interesting from the point of view of the present analysis was the style of language launched by the project team members. Projects use a mixture of corporate institutionalized talk about cars, and the project studied by Bragd was no exception. It relied on standardized expressions, three-letters acronyms, established language practices, conventions, and experience. After all, projects are born within a certain discourse. On the other hand, each project team launches its own discourse, in this way creating the foundation for the co-ordination of action between different communities of practice. Product development projects are multi-practice sites. Thus, team members tend to differentiate themselves by discursive means, while at the same time inserting themselves into an existing complex, interwoven social system.

This balancing act does not always go smoothly. VCC has a technology-oriented culture in which most employees are engineers and men. Many VCC engineers were educated at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg. Both Chalmers and VCC are subcultures known for their military style of work and male domination. Most team members were men and the team was referred to as “men”, or most often “lads” or “chaps”.

A typical example of military influence was the language use in the project team’s meetings, as well as in texts such as the Quality instructions, in which the company is referred to as the “base organization”. Another example was the constant use of the word “manpower”, instead of “staff”. A typical way of saying that staff members were given a task to perform was, “Lads were stationed to carry out the
job”\textsuperscript{5}. When a difficult and large cost review had to be completed, one room was chosen as a place to co-ordinate the task and study through the figures. The room was named “Combat Central”\textsuperscript{6}.

This language use functioned as a co-constructor of different work situations, setting the tone of meetings and raising a language barrier for new personnel, foreigners, women, and observers. When Annica Bragd was told that the project team conducted a "women’s clinic”,\textsuperscript{7} she thought of some equivalent of a Gynecology Department in a hospital, but she was told that it meant a clinical trial for a specific market segment – women. This particular women’s clinic consisted of interviews with ten wealthy women in California. The result of the women’s clinic was then communicated to the team as "female preferences" for the cars. The project team was surprised and impressed by the US women’s knowledge of cars: “They know so much about the cars …and especially they think about things men would not think about”. In time, women were perceived as a more and more important customer segment, so that the master-idea was carefully re-formulated as a "car that looks masculine but not macho" (Bragd, 2002:1), but the idea that the dominant discourse of the team, and the VVC, was excluding women, was slow to come.\textsuperscript{8}

**Old and new identities, exclusion and inclusion by discourse**

The case of the product development project at Volvo offers interesting insights in the process of community building by discursive means. Not surprisingly, the project team built its identity around the presentation of the "master-idea" – the vision of the

\textsuperscript{5} In Swedish: *Gubbar har stationerats för att genomföra jobbet*
\textsuperscript{6} In Swedish: *Stridsledningscentral*
\textsuperscript{7} In Swedish: *Kvinnoklinik*
\textsuperscript{8} Currently, VCC has a new car project, in which the product team consists only of women. One can hope that Bragd's dissertation has been influential here.
future car. Its alterity work – constructing difference – was mild: "the others" did not
differ substantially from project team members. On a time dimension, "the others"
were people who had worked with similar projects in the past, and their teams served
as analogies, as reference points: different, but only as different as the "newness" of
the project required. On a space dimension, "the others" were the VCC employees
who were not involved in the project or who were in the project group but not in the
team. They were different, but only temporarily so, as they might well be involved or
were involved in the next project.

The necessary "newness" of the project team discourse did not reach the
sediments of the inherited discourses: military, male, hostile to women,
incomprehensible (as opposed to polysemic) to newcomers and strangers. Whereas
new ways of inclusion were carefully constructed, the old means of exclusion were
unreflectively in place. This picture was corroborated in another study, where "the
project" concerned the acquisition of one company by a company from another
country.

**Danish, Swedish, male?**

Dorit Christensen studies an acquisition of a 150-year-old Danish company by a
Swedish competitor (Christensen et al., 2003). This acquisition was part of the
strategic plan of the Swedish Company that, according to its Annual Report of 1999,
intends to become one of the ten largest companies of its kind in the world by 2004.
The acquisition took place in December 1999. From the beginning, the Swedish
Company stated that the integration of the two nationalities within the company was
its explicit goal. Seven project teams were built "across the border" to function as
"integration incubators" (our metaphor). Top management was intent on constructing
"fireproof walls" (field metaphor) to protect them from intrusions from outside. Team
members were not supposed to talk with outsiders about their project work;
eventually, the seven teams were to become "mothers" (field metaphor) to 50 cross-border projects in both companies.

One of the early measures consisted of hiring consultants whose role it was to "educate" the employees about the differences between the Swedish and Danish cultures. The audience was quite surprised to hear these revelations, as neither set of employees thought that their cultures differed greatly. Some such opinions are articulated in the interviews, but it is difficult to know if they express the experience of the interviewees or merely represent a reiteration of the consultants' suggestions:

Danish Manager 1: Another thing that I have noticed – but I am not sure whether this is typically Swedish or typically Swedish Company, after all it is state-owned.... The Swedes have enormous problems making decisions. It takes a long time, and one wants to be sure that a decision has total support before one makes it. Once the decision has been made, people are very loyal to it. Whereas we Danes decide quickly, and if it turns out that it was a wrong decision, we change it. This could never happen in Sweden...

Swedish Manager 1: …in the Danish culture... one draws out everything so far, and so fast, that one risks falling down with a bigger splash... in case the opponent manages to see all the cards quickly enough, and discovers that there are no underpinnings for what is being said, that there is no support for the arguments being offered... we are a little scared of conflict in Sweden... We are afraid that somebody will come and say, “Oh yes, is that so? And where is the proof for what you are saying? There is no basis for it!” We are scared to death of being exposed and criticized.

Observe that there seems to be no malice in these comments; in fact, they sound somewhat self-critical. Perhaps it is better to provide a back-up for your decision and be loyal to it? Perhaps it is fun to be a dare-devil? The interpretations are not obvious,
but, again, it is hard to know if the utterances are spontaneous or if they have been rehearsed during the courses.

Whichever is true, the official version is that possible cultural differences may be a resource in common work: people can learn from the strong and weak sides of others, and it can result in a mix that will make the Swedish-Danish Corporation matchless. Both sides agreed that there was no clash.

Danish Manager 2: Our experience has been that the Swedish corporate management took in the Danes in a positive way and showed respect for the Danes’ knowledge and skills…. Our Managing Director is a member of the corporate management group, has influence over decisions, and they listen to him.... I know from experience, as I have myself participated in several meetings at the corporate level in relation to (...) and have witnessed the positive climate in those meetings.

Swedish Manager 2: …I believe that it was to our advantage... that we did not press for any quick changes. Had we gone there, had we taken over, and then just told them, ”This division goes down; this division goes up; this is what you need to do; pang, pang, pang...” Perhaps we would have achieved an enormous economic synergy, taken them on a short leash and moved forward in a very short time... The question is how many people would be on our side? I believe more in a ... process. To wait, not to decide what should be done from our perspective as the takers-over.

There seemed to be agreement that the acquisition was advantageous for both sides:

Danish Manager 3: In reality, we complement each other very well. I believe them when they say they bought us because we had such long experience with export and with acting in such a competitive market, compared to the Swedish monopoly. And this is mirrored in big differences in ways of acting.
Swedish CEO: Well, I believe that often it is so that ... if one puts together different competencies or different cultures, the end result is much better than if one remains within the same culture and cultivates it. So that I think this is enriching.

A discourse of understanding and complementarity, a duet in two harmonious voices – but are all voices there? The Swedish-Danish Corporation's documents are explicit about diversity management, but how diverse is this management? The leaders of all seven project teams were men. In total, there were 23 men and 2 women (one of whom resigned) in the seven teams. A woman from Human Resources in the Danish Company was later on offered the position of a project leader in one of 50 teams "across the border", but she refused the offer after an interview in the corporate headquarters in Sweden:

... I was called to a meeting in Sweden, where I discovered that everything had already been decided... so I am sitting there, and I am saying... “You know, I spent a whole day going to Stockholm, and once there, I discover that they want to force us to do certain things...” "Well yes, but you will be the project leader and you will see to it that..." "Well, this is something like 300 people who are going to be involved." "Yes, but it is you who is at the helm". I am listening to all this and I am seeing that something is clearly wrong here. I just said that I cannot force people – "Yeah, but this has been decided". Things were becoming clearer and clearer, and at the end of the day it was quite clear what was meant by that... Then I said, there is something that is wrong here; we should be talking at this meeting precisely about how it should all begin, who is going to do what, and what roles should go to whom. Instead, you tell me that all that has been decided in advance. The end of the story is that I ended it then and there, because I cannot, I cannot have the job that I have today and at the same time be

9 Some people participated in several teams.
a project leader for a project involving 300 people where everything has been
decided in advance. I simply couldn't do it.

So she refused. In 2000, a Swedish woman was recruited to a senior executive
position within Swedish Company’s Human Resource Department. She is well aware
of the discrepancy between the genders and the need to include gender issues in the
diversity perspective. When the Swedish Company acquired a company in Poland,
however, she was not included in the process of selecting the "across the border"
project leaders. Chances are that, they will all be men, as before: male "mothers," as it
were. One wonders if the new, integrative discourse does not happen to be a male
discourse. Not because it was intended to be so, but because it builds on old Swedish
and Danish discourses that, at least in these companies, seemingly excluded women.

**Talking across borders**

One interesting trait of the acquisition studied by Christensen is "a course in cultural
differences", that surprised its participants who did not expect such big differences as
suggested by consultants. Wasn't it a surprising move, an encouragement to
production of national stereotypes? It could have been the other way around – that
both management and the consultants intended to use knowledge learned in other
mergers and acquisitions. According to Vaara *et al.* (2003), who studied the merger of
four Nordic banks, the situation of merger or acquisition is in itself a trigger to the
massive production of national stereotypes, both auto- and hetero-. As one might
expect, such stereotypes partly coincide with situations, and are partly disparate, being
produced in a specific encounter. Thus it was the Danes who were careful negotiators
in the Vaara *et al.* study a – not the Swedes, but "Danes as merchants" is a well-
grounded and long-lasting stereotype. By pre-empting such a spontaneous production
and by making the cultural differences a topic of open discussion, the Swedish-Danish Corporation might have saved itself a great deal of trouble.

Why haven't women made it into this new discourse community? In their bank merger study, Tienari et al. (2003) noticed exactly the same phenomenon. Yet, they pointed out, "public discourse in the Nordic context nurtures equality and equal opportunities (...) In public discussion, it has therefore become increasingly suspicious to utter opinions and viewpoints that question the basic ideal of equality between the sexes (...) Why is equality between the sexes then still problematic in organizational practice and especially in management?" (p.234).

Their answer is that mergers and acquisitions are characterized by competition among key individuals for top organizational positions. Thus the tough becomes even tougher, giving men an advantage.

Whereas we basically agree with their argument, we would like to put a different twist to it. One could certainly debate whether it is actually true that women are "less tough" than men (in general? in top positions?) But let us return to the material: the Danish woman who went to Stockholm did not complain about gender discrimination. She just felt she did not fit. Observe how different her report of the meeting in Stockholm is from that of Danish Manager 2. Tienari et al. (2003) report that when the researchers tried to ask questions concerning gender equality, both male and female respondents were surprised because these questions "did not fit in" (p.236). In mergers and acquisitions, one can guess, the organizational "frills" are dropped; there is, indeed, an accentuation of traditional organizational functioning. And in such traditional organizational functioning, as Marta Calás and Linda Smircich pointed out a decade ago (1993), women perform home services when men go "cross borders". The two women managers mentioned in the story of Swedish-Danish
Corporation are both Human Resource specialists who are doing a properly “feminine” job – in the new global order.10

Identity and alterity interplay in construction of communities

The cases reported here, albeit somewhat perfunctorily (the original studies contain more detail), all show, predictably, that discourse is an important resource in the purposeful creation of new communities. Be they "new and desirable" as opposed to "old and undesirable", new in the sense of coalescing around a new product, or new in the sense of joining two previous communities, a creation of a "new discourse" is among the chief means of achieving the renewal.

But no new discourse smoothly replaces the previous ones. It must be translated, domesticated. In the process, what was a pure language might become a pidgin or a Creole; it might become a parody or pastiche; it might be translated with passion or with distance and derision. Nevertheless, the style of discourse is also a style of action, and although a change of discourse rarely is of a kind desired by those who introduced the change, the changes are usually more profound than the most hard-bitten skeptics would allow.

As usual, the unintended consequences tend to be more puzzling than the intended ones, at least to an observer. No discourse can be new in the sense of being created from a void; it can only be new in the sense of being constructed from material at hand. Thus, however new the new discourse, it always employs elements of old discourses.

10 This is not to diminish their roles or positions. The Swedish HR executive was the first woman in a post held for the past 20 years by a man.
The elements that were especially visible in the two last cases were elements of "old exclusions". Although the main purpose of new discourses were new communities and therefore inclusion, they inadvertently excluded the same "outsiders" – women and strangers – as did the previous ones.

This puzzling phenomenon might be better understood if the prevalent notion of "identity construction" were extended. In a peculiar division of labor, "identity" and similarity is reserved for "us", or "the self"; "alterity" and difference are reserved for "the other".11 And yet, as Gabriel Tarde has pointed out, to exist is to differ, the identity is but a type of difference (Tarde, 1893/1999:72-73). In constructing a community, as in constructing a self, there is an interplay between identity and alterity work. How do we differ from anyone else? How are we similar to each other? How do we differ and how are we similar to the “we” we were yesterday? How do the others differ from us? How are the others similar to one another? To themselves as they were yesterday? In such an interplay of identity and alterity in organizational communities, women might not even be defined as "the other". They may simply vanish, may not be distinct enough in any of those dimensions to be noticed. In the parlance of cultural studies, one might say that it is possible to exclude an "other" without even constructing her.

11 See Czarniawska, 2002, for an extended discussion of this phenomenon.
References


