Privileging text, ignoring context:
On the importance of 'objects'
in the communication of organizational meaning

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As part of the various ‘turns’ in the social sciences, including organizational studies, taking place in the last decades of the 20th century – the interpretive turn (e.g., Hiley et al., 1991), the argumentative turn (Fischer and Forester, 1993), the linguistic turn (e.g., Van Maanen, 1995), the narrative turn, the rhetorical turn – discourse analysis has signaled a shift toward ‘taking language seriously’ (White, 1992). This shift indicates an intention to explore how it is that humans construct the social world we live in through various forms of language use. The methods and methodologies have multiplied: whereas for some, the phrase “discourse analysis” signals a solid grounding in critical theoretical philosophical presuppositions, other modes of deconstructing linguistic meaning derive from hermeneutics, among them semiotics (e.g., Feldman, 1995), metaphor analysis (Yanow 1992, 2000a), category analysis (Yanow, 2003), frame reflective analysis (Rein and Schon, 1977), storytelling or narrative analyses (e.g., Abma, 1999; Maynard-Moody, 1993), and so on.

While such a focus is to be applauded over one that treats theories as “mirroring” the social world (to borrow Rorty’s term, 1979), it runs the risk of privileging language – more commonly, the written word, but also the spoken word treated as a “text analogue” (Taylor, 1971) – over acts, and even more so, over objects, the physical artifacts we create in organizational (and other) settings and vest with meaning. These often serve as the contexts for written and oral texts, and collective values, beliefs, and feelings are also communicated through them. Studies of built spaces, for example, while not disparaged in the way that analyses of nonverbal behavior have been, are, with rare exception (e.g., Gagliardi, 1990, Goodsell, 1988, 1993), still largely ignored. In the context of ‘doing,’ language – words – rarely works alone to communicate meaning: it is conveyed also through facial and bodily gestures (in fact, some research suggests that words convey only 7% of the meaning of a “message”; see, e.g., Mehrabian, 1972), and it is conveyed as well in and through inanimate objects, including those used in various organizational events and the spaces in which those events take place. It is a puzzle, then, why these other sources of meaning continue to be marginalized as a focus of study in the organizational field.

This paper addresses this issue, outlining the role(s) that objects play in communicating organizational meanings, asking what is lost in the silencing that ensues
from an analysis that privileges texts, and exploring why such privileging might be a normative practice in academe. The analysis treats texts and text analogues in the context of contemporary understanding of what it means “to do” science, and so raises questions about studying organizational objects as well, both methodological and methods.

**Organizational objects and the communication of organizational meaning(s)**

A hermeneutic approach to the study of social action (including, here, both individuals and collectives) argues that artifacts are human creations which are embedded with the values, beliefs, and/or feelings that are central to their creators at the time and in the process of their creation. Hermeneutic philosophers, such as Dilthey and Gadamer, argued that human meaning may be inferred through analysis of the artifacts in which it has been embedded (or projected) by their creators; it can be known through interpretation of these artifacts.

As hermeneutics developed originally as a codification of processes for interpreting Biblical texts, the artifacts that constituted its initial focus as its application was extended to the social world more broadly were secular written texts (e.g., fiction, poetry, non-fiction). Subsequently, its use was extended further to other modes of “inscribed” creation: paintings, sculpture, architectural design, film, and the like. By the early 1970s, philosophers were arguing that hermeneutic methods could usefully be applied to the analysis of “text-analogues” (the phrase is Taylor’s, 1971; see also Ricoeur 1971): human acts could, they argued, be treated as if they were texts and analyzed for their meanings much in the same way that written texts were. In rendering the spoken word – conversations – into transcripts for purposes of analysis, ethnomethodologists such as Garfinkel (1967) brought that realm of human activity under a hermeneutic lens as well.

From an interpretive methodological standpoint, this makes great sense. Ethnographic and participant observation studies are based on the notion that understanding meaning requires an immersion in the social world of the people or event(s) under study. That is, the researcher immerses herself in the minutiae of daily experience –

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1 I am, obviously, summarizing all too briefly here a very broad argument. Much of this is based on the description articulated in Hatch and Yanow 2003. For more extensive discussions, see, e.g., Burrell and Morgan 1979, and Polkinghorne 1983.

2 In fact, one of Gadamer's departures from Dilthey was his observation that hermeneutic processes described not just a mode of understanding texts, but the way humans make sense of any new situation, including everyday life.
the particulars of local language and jargon, the characters and their roles, the settings, their acts, the reasons for their acts\(^3\) – in the understanding that a grasping of the unspoken, underlying, “common” sense can be yielded from a close “reading” of these artifacts. What this means is that inquiry proceeds not at the level of meaning abstracted from experience, but at the level of concrete language, acts, \textit{and objects} as these are used by participants in the situation being studied. This approach designates a symbolic relationship, in which the more concrete artifacts represent the more abstract meanings – values, beliefs, feelings – that they embody.

Researchers seeking to understand human meaning customarily do not access it directly. The data we can have direct access to, most easily, through whatever observational technique, are artifacts -- language, objects, acts -- and analysis of these data consists of “reading out of” or inferring from them the underlying meanings they hold for their creators and/or users. For organizational studies (and analyses of other sorts of collective entities), this principle may be applied not only to individual members of the organization, but also to the organization (or one of its sub-units) as a whole.\(^4\) Much in the same way that a researcher might infer what is meaningful to an individual by striking up a conversation while waiting on line at the supermarket and attending to the words spoken, the tone of voice, and other elements of nonverbal language, including dress, bearing, and facial expressions, the researcher might infer an organization’s values from the language of its memos and annual reports, its regularly scheduled activities (annual meetings, holiday celebrations), and the design or use of the physical artifacts, including buildings and other spaces, which convey this language, are used in these acts, and house both acts and interactions.

\textbf{Silencing objects}

It is ironic that in limiting scientific study to the realm of “directly observable” data, excluding the realm of meaning (values, beliefs, feelings), positivist-informed organizational studies have by and large turned a blind eye to the very physical world of objects, while favoring the printed word and human action. The second irony is that studies informed by

\(^3\) The last four items partially echo Burke’s (1945) analytic scheme, which he derived from his studies of plays and other fictional literature.

\(^4\) I would need much more space than this paper affords me to argue on behalf of collective knowing and learning. See, e.g., Cook and Yanow 1993, Yanow 2000b, and the essays in Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow 2003.
interpretive presuppositions, such as participant observations, ethnographies, content and discourse analyses, and so on, have done so as well. And so an explanation for this silencing must be sought elsewhere than in ontological and epistemological reasoning.

In his introduction to the collection of papers that were presented at the 1987 SCOS conference in Milan which called attention to the symbolic role of artifacts in communicating organizational meanings, Gagliardi (1990) noted the neglect of artifacts in organizational analyses. He offered several explanations for this: the relative emphasis on explaining human behavior; the relegation of material culture to the past, when it is the sole source of information available for analysis (as in archaeology); the extent to which artifacts take on a “common sense” invisibility; difficulties in developing interpretation skills; and a general orientation, inculcated through our professional training and practice as academics, toward mental processes and cognition. Gagliardi remarked on the extent to which organizational culture studies as a field focused on beliefs (cognitive experience; logos) and values (moral experience; ethos), ignoring sensuous experience (pathos) -- “the way we perceive and ‘feel’ reality” (p. 13) -- as an equally central aspect of the meaning dimension of human action. He postulated that this was due to the heightened focus on the rational dimension of human life: academics’ greater comfort in the logos and ethos of existence.

There is much to be said for these explanations. What binds them together is an underlying sense about the character of knowing, together with a normative stance toward that particular form of knowing and the kind of knowledge it affords. This form of knowing privileges texts and “text analogues” (Taylor, 1971) that inscribe acts, first, and the spoken word, second, on paper. This attitude reflects a professional-practice-based disinclination to attend to the physical world, starting with academics’ surrounding spaces⁵, and a heightened comfort level in dealing with texts and acts; a discomfort with the indeterminacy of meaning, especially that which draws on and calls attention to bodily experience; and a privileging of a kind of knowing that is grounded in the university and in technical-rational expertise -- that is, in contemporary understandings of what it means “to do” science. It is this that may underlie the analytic invisibility of artifacts, and the putative difficulties in developing interpretation skills may arise from a disinclination to do so, also deriving from these explanations.

⁵ Scholars in human or social geography, architectural design, and planning are obvious exceptions.
Why such privileging might be a normative practice in academe

One might suppose that the original textual orientation of hermeneutic analysis might explain why objects are not routinely included, by and large, in organizational analysis. But this explanation seems inadequate in light of the fact that hermeneutic analysis has been extended beyond texts to conversations and acts. Like them, built spaces, design elements, furnishings and other decor, dress, trophies, and so on are susceptible to word-based description and rendering as text analogues that might be subjected to analysis. Why, then, privilege words, and acts rendered in words, over physical artifacts rendered similarly?

From a work practices or a sociology of the professions perspective, the professional practice of academic life focuses on ideas, as communicated through written texts and through lectures, seminar discussions, and collegial or advisory conversations. The primary mode of socialization to the profession is hermeneutic: reading and analyzing written texts, lecture notes, course papers, dissertation drafts; and later, as a “journeyman” assistant professor, article drafts, reviewers’ critiques, and editors’ comments. ‘Academic talk’ is a close second socialization mode. This orientation toward language may be the single characteristic common across all academic disciplines, all university departments and programs. I cannot think of any area of study -- even in the arts -- that does not engage written texts in some form at the graduate level as new members begin their apprenticeships on the road to becoming faculty.

Acts come next in importance – orientation sessions for new members, general exams and dissertation defenses for those moving on to successive ranks, graduation ceremonies for those moving on to the next setting. Although these are also widely participated in – one might even argue for their universality as well, although particular forms and sequences vary – the difference is that these are engaged at face value, without much representational meaning. Although they may model for apprentices what teaching

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6 I am thinking, analytically, here of Phyllis Chock’s (1995) wonderful analysis of “Congressional ‘talk’.” I have not seen any similar analysis of academic talk practices, although Latour’s (1987) and Traweek’s (1992) works comes close, both of them looking at lab scientists. But the same attention that philosophers, sociologists, and historians of science and technology have paid to work practices in the natural and physical sciences has not been directed at social scientists, with the exception of works in anthropology looking at the production of texts (QED!; Geertz 1988, Van Maanen 1986) and studies of rhetoric in economics and political science (McCloskey 1985, Brown 1976, Edelman 1977, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2002).
and advising should look like, they do not model the core of academic life in its research mode.

Settings, too, might be thought to have a kind of universality: classrooms, laboratories, offices, campuses, living spaces, dining halls. But these are not universally-shared experiences in their forms, nor are the experiences part of the research process. The lived experience of a lab, from the perspective of apprenticeship to a research practice, lies in the observational, or scientific, activity that takes place there. That is what is being intentionally modeled, more than the shape of the room, the type of wall coverings, the color of paint, and so on. Spatial characteristics are – or are treated as if they were – incidental to the major activity taking place within and before them: the acts of doing science. And so it is only those fields in which present-day physical settings are germane to the research process – community organizing, cultural anthropology, city planning, and the like – that attend to spaces and other objects and their central role in the communication of meaning (outside of the historic, relic-oriented study of the past, as Gagliardi notes).

Second, there is the matter of the (in)determinacy of language and the "professional" discomfort with bodies and "embodied" meaning, which shifts attention away from the mind, in a Cartesian duality. Although we might say that the meaning of all language is indeterminate (Harshav 2003), the meaning of physical artifacts has a double indeterminacy. First, if the meaning of language is indeterminate, how much more so the meaning of objects. The vocabulary of objects exists largely in the perceptual, non-linguistic world, and in order to communicate explicitly about an object, its traits must be translated into language. If linguistic meanings are themselves indefinite, then the meanings of objects are twice removed from any sort of definitiveness. This poses a problem for (positivist) science, which requires that meanings be made explicit and that explicit meaning not be ambiguous.

This problem is compounded by the process through which object meanings are communicated, understood, and researched. In order to talk about them scientifically, the researcher draws on her own personal, bodily experience of them in an act of empathic imagination concerning their meaning to those who engage them regularly. This requires making room for bodily experience and meaning within the realm of science.

Rogers (1964) described the process this way. One first forms inner hypotheses, in a subjective mode of knowing within oneself, “from within my own internal frame of
reference” in which “I consult my experiencing of the situation” (pp. 110, 111). This is the process Rogers describes as the researcher “making patterned sense out of his experiencing” (p. 112). This provisional assumption as to the meaning of the physical (or other) artifacts so experienced must then be checked – corroborated or refuted – in observation of others’ uses and responses and/or in conversation with those others about their uses and responses. This entails translation by both researcher and situational actor of their own experiences and meanings into words, and then subsequent “translation” of the frame of reference of each into the other’s terms. In the process, the researcher’s initial personal knowledge is made public and mutually validated knowledge.

It is, I think, relatively easy to see why positivist-informed science would be uncomfortable with such work. Positivism presupposes a correspondence theory of truth or meaning: there must be a one-to-one correspondence between the artifact and its meaning. The indeterminacy of meanings twice removed from their sense-based experience gives rise to more ambiguity than such a system can tolerate. But one of the characteristics of symbols is their ability to encompass multiple meanings, depending on the frame of reference of the community of meaning engaging the artifact (Yanow 1996, ch. 1); and so this indeterminacy cannot be eliminated, quite aside from the acceptance of the role of tacit knowledge in object-oriented meaning-making.

What makes even most interpretive scholars uncomfortable dealing with the physical world is the extent to which objects, and especially built spaces, are grounded in and

7 For empirical examples see Stein (2001) on classrooms and policy implementation, and my own work on museums in New York and Oakland, California and community centers in Israel (Yanow 1998, 1996).

8 Drawing on Polanyi’s (1962) notions of personal knowledge, Rogers (p. 113) defines objective knowledge as “publicly validated knowledge”: hypotheses “checked both by externally observable operations and by making empathic inferences” about their acceptance by the researcher’s community (much in the way that Kuhn [1970] described a scientific paradigm, or in the sense of a hermeneutic circle, more broadly). For Rogers, then, objective knowledge is about things “observable by others,” which observations “can be checked by another” (p. 113). The intersubjective knowing that I am describing here is what Rogers terms interpersonal or phenomenological knowing, in which the researcher uses “whatever skill and empathic understanding” she has “to get inside [the other’s] private world of meanings, and see whether [her] understanding is correct” (p. 115). This may be done through direct inquiry or by inferring from acts (including nonverbal behaviors) and language used. Corroboration of the validity of the inference comes either from direct acknowledgment or by confirmation from third parties articulating similar interpretations, possibly supported by logical claims (“it is the most reasonable and most parsimonious explanation of the behavior”; p. 116).
recapitulate bodily experience in their embodiment and communication of meaning; and in Western science, body has been severed from mind. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) captured this point in their analysis of the orientational aspect of a considerable part of American English, as expressed through its metaphors: up-down, front-back, centralPeripheral, and so forth. "Up" is associated with control ("He's at the height of his power," p. 15); more of something is "up," as the pile gets taller ("My income rose last year," p. 16); and "status is correlated with (social) power and (physical) power is up" ("He has a lofty position," p. 16). "These spatial orientations," they wrote, "arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment" (p. 14). To say that buildings "embody" meaning may have a quasi-literal as well as a figurative sense.9

To see the link between organizational spaces and human bodies one need look no further than the English-language terms for organization, corporation, headquarters. It is common in the US, for instance, to “read” the 14th floor office (in a 14-story building) as a symbol of its occupant’s high status within the organization. Humans "embody" vertical, erect bodies; Western society values reason and the rational, which is seen as brain activity; brains reside at the topmost position of our bodies; and so we ensconce our organizational leaders – those at the heights of hierarchy (itself part of this conceptual configuration), control, income, and therefore economic, social and organizational power – at the tops of our buildings. In Oakland, California, as elsewhere in the US, wealthier enclaves are located in the city’s hills, whereas the poor and the working classes reside in the “flatlands.” In class discussions, some students have correlated this privileging of “up”- or “top”-ness with God’s “residence” in the heavens. Organizational design recapitulates bodily design and cultural valuations.

An Indian student some years ago, however, noted that executive offices in Indian organizations were more typically located on the ground or second through the sixth floors. When there is little, no or inconsistent electricity and elevators are non-existent or unpredictable, office space on floors easily accessible by foot is more desirable than a grand view (Mazumdar, 1988: III-145). There is, however, a possible body-centered, cultural or meaning-focused explanation for such a design choice as well, that draws on Hindu traditions. The Upanishads relate that the center of human being lies just below a hand’s span from where the lowest ribs converge. Also, according to the legend, the world (in the form of a lotus blossom) sprang from Vishnu’s navel while he slept. For a culture that

9 These paragraphs are based on Yanow (1996, ch. 6).
locates the “soul” in the center of the body and values it more highly than the head as the source of human activity, it makes less sense for corporate headquarters to be at the heights of buildings.

In a subsequent class discussion, a Ghanaian student indicated that there, too, having one’s office on the highest floor would signal that the occupant is of relatively low status. In Ghana, as in India, executive offices are closer to the ground (or were, at least, in the 1980s-early 1990s when these observations were made). Furthermore, she was perplexed by her American classmates’ association of height with the heavens and God and human social status. In Ashanti culture, she said, Gods are in the earth as well, and libations are poured to them on the ground. She further noted that only poorer Ghanaians lived in the hills because hill residents had to walk longer distances from the downtown markets, carrying heavy bundles on their heads.

These various attitudes -- those inculcated in academics through professional socialization and practices, and the discomfort with ambiguity, indeterminacy of meaning, associated interpretive acts, and bodily focus in meaning-making -- are aspects of an overarching explanation for the privileging of texts and discourse over objects. This has to do with different kinds of knowledge, one of which is more highly prized within academic practices than the other because of its association with the traditional, and today hegemonic, understanding of what it means to do science and to be scientific.

A distinction may be drawn between two different modes of knowing: that associated with intellectual ability (“I know”; Middle English knowen; Dutch, Ik ken, kennen), and that associated with physical ability (“I can”; Old English can or con, cunnan; Dutch, Ik kan, kunnen). The terms are part of systems of knowing-learning that include different types of knowers and their occupational and gender characteristics and

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10 This section draws on Yanow (in press). See also canny, “having or showing knowledge and skill in applying it; fully competent,” and ken, “perception; understanding” (Middle English kennen, Old English cennan, to make known (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, William Morris, ed., 1975, pp. 197, 717). The same dictionary (p. 322) gives Old English cunnan (I can) as the etymological source, but also suggests a possible Middle English source in connen, to know. The definitions, however, appear to me to be on the whole more in keeping with ability than with knowledge: “Adj. 1. Shrewd; crafty; artful. 2. Executed with or exhibiting ingenuity.... –n. 1. Skill in deception; craftiness; guile. 2. Skill or adeptness in performance; expertness; adroitness; dexterity.” I am indebted to Ralph Hummel (2001) for helping me see this implication of the analysis developed here. Although he draws on his familiarity with the German language, my personal history makes me more comfortable using the cognate Dutch.
concomitant forms of scientific practices for producing knowledge and reasoning about it. “I know”/known/kennen – mental action and ability – is associated with mind-based work; “I can”/cunnan/kunnen – physical action and ability -- with physical labor. Because “knowing” is associated with reason, it draws with it stereotypes of masculinity; cunnan/kunnen – as in “cunning” – is associated with intuition and “feel” (in both kinesthetic and affective meanings of the word), bringing in the (stereotypically) feminine. These, in turn, have implications for modes of language use: verbal for explicitly stated technical-rational expertise; nonverbal for intuition and tacit knowledge, characterized by the same indeterminacy and ambiguity of meaning discussed above. These systems of knowledge are summarized in the table.
### Systems of knowledge

Social scientific attitudes toward knowledge appear to be in keeping with a rational-
technical-"scientific" approach (in the sense of positivist science, following the spirit of the
so-called scientific method): knowledge is made up of detached, universal, generalizable
facts that can be known objectively, absent the context of their origin. By contrast, the
realm of physical objects requires a more "intimate," insider’s knowing, one which is not
necessarily based on explicitly-known and communicated rules. This analysis suggests that
the source of the analytic ignoring of built space and other physical objects as sources of
meaning may be located, at least in part, in the politics of "expertise" and of science, in
which scientific knowledge became associated with university training, itself available, even
until recently, only to elites.  It is the heritage of this definition of what it means to “do”
science and to be scientific that leads to the disparagement of object-related knowledge;
and this operative definition is powerful enough to carry even into oppositional, interpretive
modes of knowing that might be expected to be sympathetic to and accommodate the study
of objects as meaning-carriers.

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11 These roots lie in the very understanding of the character of knowledge developed by
Hegel in the early 1800s, building on and in response to Kant’s writings in the previous
century, undergirding much of the philosophical developments articulated by social
positivists such as John Stewart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, which are embedded in
contemporary ideas about knowledge, and hence about science and expertise, including
within organizational studies.
At what cost?

Clearly, privileging language over other sources of meaning in an organizational context artificially and unnecessarily limits the range of research questions that might be asked about meaning-related matters, thereby narrowing our potential understanding of a wide variety of processes that affect organizational life.

But there is, I think, another, potentially even more serious cost to the ignoring of non-linguistic sources of data, in terms of methodological arguments and procedures themselves. The same characteristics of ambiguity and indefiniteness seen to mark the study of physical objects, and the same discomfort (at best) with the bodily associations and experiences that mark those studies, are central characteristics of interpretive empirical research methods. And so an entire range of methods for accessing data, along with tools for analyzing them, which depend on reflective introspection and self-awareness for the understanding of others’ experiences, is ruled out of existence by this orientation toward that which originates in words. That is, it is not just physical objects that are lost in the study of organizational realities; it is the processes and methods of study themselves that are lost. The authors in Gellner and Hirsch (2001), and the editors themselves, seek to mount an argument for the utility of ethnographic work in the study of organizations. Although more such work has been published than noted in their references, it is still a marginal and marginalized undertaking in organizational studies and, I am guessing in required methods courses in management curricula.\footnote{See Schwartz-Shea (2003) for the comparable study in US political science curricula.}

This has costs not only for the “production” of knowledge and understanding but, in terms of the sociology of the discipline, for scholars who prefer and are more adept at that mode of study. It enables, certainly, a focus on built space and other physical artifacts and their roles in communicating organizational meanings. But it also facilitates studies of meaning-making and interpretive processes far more broadly, including of language in all its forms and acts. If this is the cost of the privileging of texts, we all lose.

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