TEAM BRIEFING: A CASE OF "OPEN COMMUNICATION"

DARIUSZ GALASINSKI

Dariusz Galasinski is research fellow at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Wolverhampton, Castle View, Dudley, UK.

Introduction[1]

As part of its policy of encouraging all staff to be involved in and to take responsibility for the quality of its educational services, there is a British university which has instituted team briefings as a channel of internal communication. The briefing, as the statement on its written complement reads, is **a regular opportunity for open communication within the University**.[2]

The system operating in the University is borrowed from industry and conforms closely to the model proposed by the Industrial Society. According to the Society team briefing is a system of regular meetings to pass on management information to employees (Middleton 1983). It is face-to-face, in small teams, convened by a team leader to pass on relevant information. Often the briefing process is accompanied by pre-prepared written notes circulated to employees before the meeting. The documents to be discussed are examples of such notes. They are issued prior to team briefings meetings which are supposed to be held on a regular, monthly basis. At each level managers are supposed to flesh out the agenda set by the briefing document with matters of local significance.

Recent surveys of British industry show that team briefing is one of the most popular modes of employee communication. The Marchington et al. (1992) report points out that 20 out of 25 companies surveyed used some sort of team briefing system as a means of communicating within the organisation. Moreover, a more recent survey by the Industrial Society shows that the popularity of this mode of communication is quite stable. In January 1994, 82 per cent of the 915 organisations surveyed used some sort of team briefing system (Industrial Society 1994).

Now, "open communication" seems to be something which the most senior of managers of large, corporate organisations are prepared to recommend (Smythe D. L. 1995, 19). A survey conducted by Smythe Dorward Lambert[3] of 54 "top UK publicly quoted companies and public sector organisations" found that

> *Few companies had progressed as far as developing a written communication policy, either as part of a communication strategy or as part of a business plan. In some cases, the "policy" was expressed primarily in the form of the job description of the manager responsible* (Smythe D. L. 1990, 15)

A principal conclusion drawn from the survey was, that while the CEOs of most companies said they regarded internal communication as increasingly important, relatively few had yet backed this up in terms of management priority and investment in resources. The companies with the most developed policy, and which had committed resources to support it, were not the largest, nor those with the most complex internal structures, but "those which had experienced considerable change over the past five years, such as privatisation, merger or take-over." Attention to internal communication has more recently been endorsed by government agencies (Employment Department 1994) and the Royal Society of Arts (1995). The Employment Department (1994, 3ff) formulates the principles of open communication in the following way:

> *No organisation can perform at its best unless each employee is committed to the corporate objectives (...). Effective employee involvement is likely to comprise (...) effective and continuing two-way communication between management and employees, especially about the organisation's objectives and its progress towards meeting them; encouragement of employees to contribute their knowledge and experience to operational decisions (...).*

It is reinforced by a definition offered by Caldwell (1994, 17):

> *direct, face-to-face communication in which employees are active participants, encouraged to ask questions, offer feedback and assume ownership for actions agreed within a framework of open dialogue.*

Thus open communication will be understood here as a process in which participants are able to exercise relatively equal communicative rights and can be seen to be involved in something approaching dialogic communicative exchange, in as much as each party to the exchange can initiate topics. As far as possible, such communication is also transparent, in the sense that it avoids ambiguities and "hidden agendas."

Objectives and Assumptions

The objective of this paper is to analyse the discursive representations of the communicative process taking place within the University as rendered by the team briefing in question. If the team briefs are indeed a regular opportunity for open communication, and thus part of the University's commitment to this communication style, just how is the communicative process within the University constructed, who are the participants in it, what are their communicative roles and rights? I am interested in the team brief notes for what they reveal about the understandings of communication between and with employees. This will include analysing the representations of both the employees of the University (management and staff) as well as their faculties and potential actions. Note also that I am interested here in the representations of the communication process regardless of whether it is that achieved by team briefing, or

through some other channel. In other words I am interested in representations of the employees of the University, their faculties and (potential) actions as communicators.

Methodologically, the paper is based within critical language study (cf. e.g., Fowler et al. 1979; Fairclough 1992; Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard 1996). I assume here therefore that representation is mediated by culturally and ideologically created value-systems that are inherent in the medium, the language itself (cf. Fowler 1996). Thus language not only represents reality outside it, but also, and more importantly even, constructs it. Linguistic analysis in turn is capable of revealing those constructions by accessing the host of assumptions and values carried by every linguistic choice.

The data this paper analyses are a set of monthly team briefing notes (covering the period of over 3 and a half years of the system's existence) issued in writing to every member of staff (academic, administrative and technical) within the University. The notes consist of two distinct parts. The first one is a short statement about the purpose of the briefings and their mechanism — they assist managers to inform their staff, and the staff can ask questions and expect them to be answered. The statement is visually differentiated from the rest of the brief — different type-face and it is placed within a frame. The second part is the briefing itself. As the initial statement has it, it should consist of "**important developments affecting the University and its staff and students**."

The discussion below will take the following route. Firstly, I shall consider the constructions of the communicative situation established by the team briefing. I shall also discuss the potential participants thereof. Secondly, I shall focus on types of messages (speech acts) the participants are represented to be issuing. Finally, I shall address the question of the **raison d'être** of these messages, the problem to be dealt with in terms of speaker rights.

What Is Going On?

It's Good To Be Briefed

There are two occasions on which the team briefing itself is mentioned in the corpus. Firstly, the statement which is at the head of every issue of the notes, and secondly, after the system had been in operation for approximately 14 months, when problems with it had been voiced in a survey of staff views and attitudes. The survey indicated that to some the briefing seemed redundant since people worked closely on a regular basis with their line manager. To a greater number, the briefing notes seemed generally trivial or irrelevant. Despite the said problems, the briefing is constructed in largely positive terms. Witness:

> *A recent survey has indicated that the Team Briefing system is not working universally as intended — i.e. as a face-to-face briefing which all members of staff attend. The survey also found where it is working properly, takes place regularly as a meeting, includes matters of local importance and expands on the local effects of University-wide items, allows for two-way communication with questions passed up the line and answered, then staff see it as a valuable means of communication.*

It is not the system which is at fault, but rather its implementation. Moreover, once the system is executed properly, the institution of the team briefing is perceived by the staff in positive terms. The positive framing of the team briefing is done in two ways. On the one hand, in the recurring initial statement, the briefing is described by

an unmodalised statement ascribing to it the faculty of being part of open communication. On the other hand, it is not merely the (unknown) sender who thinks that the team briefing system works well — it is also the staff (interestingly, the details of the survey are not revealed in the brief). Not only then is it true by virtue of a categorical statement, it is also true because people think so — it is good to be briefed.

Who Is Talking?

The individual member of staff in receipt of her/his monthly portion of University news can quite plausibly assume on the basis of her/his extra-linguistic knowledge that s/he - together with her/his colleagues — is the intended addressee of those messages. The identity of the sender, however, is less clear. There is no explicit declaration, nor indeed, clue in any of the briefs as to the identity of the primary source of information, although readers are informed that their line managers will be passing this information down the line, which positions them in the role of a spokesperson or mouthpiece.

The identity of the addressee is dealt with in the recurring statement of purpose. The team briefings are used to **notify staff**, but in so doing, the identity of the originator is already blurred. Witness an excerpt from the initial statement:

> *Line Managers take the opportunity to notify staff of important developments affecting the University and its staff and students. Staff are actively encouraged to ask questions regarding these and other issues. If unable to answer any such questions directly, Line Managers will seek to obtain a response from more senior management within 48 hours.*

Even though it is line managers who do the briefing at the "shop floor" level, they cannot be the authors of the brief. Firstly because they may not be able to answer some questions regarding the issues briefed, and secondly, while they may encourage staff to ask questions, some other unidentified body does so too. Moreover, the third person reference in the last sentence can be read as an instruction from some higher authority. As such the sentence indicates that line managers are an element of both power and communication chains in which there are more senders or, perhaps, relay persons.

Furthermore, the occasional use of the exclusive **we** (i.e. indicating that the speaker forms a group of which the addressees are not a part; cf. Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990; Wilson 1990) as the senders of the message (as in "We hope to receive the actual certificate before Christmas or we cannot be specific about the targets") does not reveal the identity of the sender. If anything, it shows that the University team consists of at least two groups — one which is speaking and the other which is listening, the pattern, as will be shown later, permeates the texts. Interestingly, such are the only instances where the sender of the message is explicitly represented in the message, even if her/his identity is not clear. If there is an aspiration to represent the organisation as interconnected teams working with a common purpose, to realise the University's mission, such textually constructed relations might put them under considerable strain.

The clues as to who is talking are indirect and can be encountered in fragments such as the following:

> *The Directorate wishes all staff a very Happy New Year.*

Now, even though "The Directorate" (the executive pinnacle of the institution, re-

sponsible to the Board of Governors) is placed as the subject of the sentence in the third person (and thus removes any explicit links to the speaker), the sentence makes a clear distinction between the employees of the University: the Directorate and the staff. As it is the staff who are the recipients of the briefs, could it then be the Directorate who is sending them. However, the utterance could still be heard as originating from a source other than the The Directorate. This could be another party **reporting** The Directorate's greetings, just as are others' views or thanks occasionally conveyed in the notes.

Given that team briefings are to be instances of open communication this state of affairs seems quite puzzling. Why is it that the reader is not explicitly informed about the identity of the originator? I would argue that it is an attempt to make the texts more objectively authoritative, to give them a status of the "voice of God." As Hodge and Kress (1993, 92) point out the third-person form of sentences detaches them from any potential speaker impersonalising them thereby. This in turn implies a neutral transmitter of the information. Such a form can also serve to give utterances the force of "natural-law" directive, as in the case of:

> *It is expected that all members of staff receiving complaints should address the complaint swiftly (...)*

If team briefing is supposed to be open communication, and if open communication is supposed to be sufficiently transparent for the identity of the participants to be clearly known, it is difficult to find evidence of this attribute in the examples analysed here. The backgrounding (cf. Van Leeuven 1996) of the originator makes it unclear who actually is the source of expectation. Arguably, the identification of a specific institutional source would weaken the force of the directive. This is an almost classical example of masking reality (cf. Ng and Bradac 1993) or obfuscating it. Is the voice which delivers the briefing notes, that of the Directorate speaking as one, a reporting voice which speaks of the Directorate much as it would other groups of staf, or a yet more potent, legislative force?

The Message

In this section I shall deal with the representations of messages which are, or can be, sent within the University. More particularly, I shall be interested in finding out what kind of speech acts are ascribed to individuals or groups within the organisation.

Listen! – Communication Down The Line

It is already in the initial statement that the brief lays out the communication pattern of communication exercised in briefing — the Line Managers are going to **notify the staff of important developments** (...). Indeed, it seems that by far the most frequent representation of communication within the University is that of transfer of communication down the line of hierarchy. Information is **circulated**, staff are **reminded** or *receive* **operational information**, subjects are **covered**, rumours are **confirmed**, things are **announced**. Occasionally groups or individuals are thanked or congratulated. None of the terms typically selected are suggestive of communicative processes in which the sender of those messages would be constructed as a listener, still less a participant in discussion. The only time the communicative event of discussion is mentioned is when staff are asked to discuss a matter with their colleagues:

Please discuss with your colleagues the implications of the statement for your own School or Department.

The sender does not listen, s/he merely informs or reports in a voice-of-God, unmodalised, unhesitant manner. Witness the following excerpts:

As a result [of an audit], the Agenda for the University is: (...)

Please remember that until we have received our official notification, which we expect in mid-July, the correct answer to any question is: "The University has been recommended (...)"

Both excerpts show the sender's power both to set the agenda for the university as well as dictate to staff what they are to say in case they are asked about a certain matter. There is no invitation for discussion, no mention of any consultation process or the like. Things are the way they are announced and must be followed - communication channel is opened only to download information necessary to comply with the requirements of the sender.

The second of the excerpts is particularly interesting. The sender attempts to mitigate the order by appearing to use an inclusive "we" (and the insertion of "please," of course). Were this an example of journalism, such use of "we" would not occur since it implies membership of a group whose actions are reported. So, both the sender and the addressee might be construed as awaiting the notification implying they are members of the same organisation. However, they are not in exactly the same boat, for the speaker knows things that others do not - the date when official notification can be expected, and the correct answer to the question specified. The speaker is a more informed member of the community conjured up by the use of "we," and of the community itself it is implied that there are at least divisions within it so far as levels of information are concerned.

On My Mark - Communication Up The Line

Although the sender is predominantly engaged in speech acts which do not entail response from the addressee, the representation of the communication process within the institution is not one-way only. Indeed, the addressees, the staff, can also communicate up the line of hierarchy.

The first instance of that ability is shown in the initial statement in that

Staff are encouraged to ask questions regarding these or any other issues.

Although "staff" are granted speaker rights, their communicative role is constructed as limited to mere question-asking. The dialogue which is to be one of the defining characteristics of open communication is confined to a question-answer exchange, a communicative event which presupposes the power of the answerer (cf. for example the Prime Minister's question time in the British Parliament) — s/he is in the know. It therefore reinforces the construction of communication within the institution as mainly transferring information down the line, information which is there to be received, absorbed, and, perhaps, questioned. There is no evidence of staff being encouraged to initiate topics, however.

There are three instances, however, where staff are constructed more actively. Consider:

Please discuss with your colleagues the implications of the statement for your own School or Department.

X is reviewing the Scheme and would welcome suggestions about how the Scheme could be improved.

If you know, you have a problem with the procedure, write to the Procedure Owner[4] *or get your Line Manager to write.*

Interestingly, in all three cases the communicative actions ascribed to "staff" are not those which were, or will be taken. The first of the excerpts is quite similar to exercise-like instructions, once asked, say, of foreign language students who may be asked to carry out a conversation on a given topic. In the "world" of the team briefings the addressees do not communicate, they are only asked or encouraged to communicate, implying perhaps that they do not do so in the absence of such exhortations. The sender seems also to be the gate-keeper of the communication process. One who allocates the floor to others. In such a way, the "open" communication process seems to be opened only when the sender deems it appropriate. Moreover, the excerpts above indicate that communication the staff are asked to engage in is either between peers or between people relatively close on the ladder of hierarchy. Not once are the staff constructed as communicating to members of senior management. Indeed, when the gap gets dangerously wide — as in the case of the third excerpt, the advice is to get the Line Manger to write to the Procedure Owner. The grass-roots do not communicate with the top management directly.

The Process — the Power to Communicate

Open communication involves dialogue, partnership in the communicative process, managers speaking to employees and employees speaking to managers. But how does one establish a communicative partnership if one of the supposed partners does not even reveal her/his identity. The employees of the University are not even told who is doing the talking - even if the texts are merely to operate as an aid to the face-to-face briefing, still they remain anonymous, presenting the information passed as objective truth or the natural law. The intended dialogue is in fact represented as one-way transfer of information to be digested by the addressee, the representation communication upwards, from the employees to the sender does not exist.

Moreover, the briefing notes foster unproductive ambiguity. While it is tempting to suggest these notes are authored by senior managers, the texts themselves do not licence any such suggestion. Staff may imprint such an identity on the source, but the irritation they experience[5] may stem from the fact that this identity does not always fit. The notes may equally have been authored by yet another unidentified source given the reporting conventions employed. Now, it is possible to argue that hardly anything would have been gained from the explicit identifications of the source of information. Employees can and do make assumptions about authorship. It seems to me, however, that openness of communication should preclude the need to guess, it should be transparent. The team briefs in questions are not.

The communicative situation constructed in the corpus is that between a group of persons only implicitly identified in the texts (the sender) and the employees, the staff (the addressee). Although, the briefing is said to be part of open communication within the University, the sender has the most — if not all — communicative rights (what each is allowed (or not) and required (or not) to say in the particular type of discourse; cf. Fairclough 1989: 38).

Fundamentally, it is only the sender who can establish the communicative situation between her/him and the "staff" — the staff cannot initiate briefing, be it because the name itself is suggestive of the knowledge the sender has and decided to share. The sender's rights go beyond the right to speak, though. S/he is also constructed as having the right to let speak — to allocate the floor, to control it. As indicated above, the communicative processes in which the employees are constructed as actors is occasioned by the sender — s/he asks or tells to communicate. It is also the sender therefore who decides what kind of communicative event the addressee will be engaged in.

Also the type of message is governed by different rights. The knowledge the sender has decided to pass down the institution is transferred by notification, reminders, announcements, etc. All those speech acts carry with them the assumption of the right to issue them as one of their preconditions. The sender/speaker makes little or no effort to legitimise the assumption of that right. No credentials are offered as they might be in other circumstances. When video news magazines are employed by companies to brief staff, a manager's right to speak is often indicated with reference to their functional expertise, even if this is only by means of captions giving the manager's name and functional title. No equivalent devices are employed in these briefing notes.

The briefing notes allow that staff can remind or notify their managers, they cannot very well do it in the way it is done in the team briefings, i.e., with these speech act verbs explicit in the sentence structure. Employees are constructed as able to ask questions, a speech act which puts its addressee in the position of knowing and having access to knowledge and thus, in an institutional setting, power. As such the communicative process constructed in the team briefings is hardly indicative of open communication — there is virtually nothing — perhaps apart from opening the channel itself - which would indicate an attempt on the part of the management — the sender — to empower the staff, engage in a dialogue with them, or at least construct the organisation as flat. This further obfuscates reality by effacing the several other formal and informal channels which are founded about dialogic principles.

As the analysis in terms of speaker's rights shows, to communicate in the world of the team briefing means to be in charge. Paradoxical as it may seem, the discursive constructions of the communicative process suggest that while perhaps intended to be an instance of open communication, the texts may merely reaffirm management's privileged position in the eyes of staff. Apparently set up to facilitate communication, mutually informative discourse between members of the University, the notes serve instead management by proclamation.

One could argue, however, that a briefing is not a consultation paper, is not a discussion forum and thus will consist mainly of downward communication. The analysis therefore might be seen as at least to an extent skewed because of the data. It seems one can counter such arguments.

While team briefing indeed entails cascading information down the organisational ladder, the choice of the genre itself can be seen as ideologically motivated. It is already the word briefing which implies a category of those in the know and those who are not. Such a device does not acknowledge interpretive differences, nor fundamentally different ways of understanding and operating in the same organisation. It presumes consensus about such fundamentals. The genre itself is more than a mere tool for relaying information, for while it implicitly avows frameworks wherein the messages conveyed appear to be useful information, it disavows those which regard the same messages as trivial and irrelevant.

Moreover, the object of analysis was the construction of communicative process rather than other aspects of corporate reality. While one can argue that the genre may imply the use of categorical statements about policies or management decisions, the representations of communications are not part of them. Especially that the analysis shows a contradiction between how things are represented linguistically and the declared policy of open communication. Note also that the representations do not only include the management and their communicative activities but also more or less explicitly refer to those by the staff.

Conclusions

The representations of the communicative process in a university's team briefings indicate an organisation which is steep, hierarchical and whose communication is primarily downward with virtually no scope for dialogue. It is an organisation which would seem to espouse the principle that only those who lead communicate. The University is constructed as consisting of groups with unequal communicative rights and these constructions reinforce the power structure of the institution. This is again hardly indicative of the claimed openness of communication within the University.

Now, all that said, the reality of any enterprise suggests that there are managers and there are those who are managed. That there is some sort of hierarchy which means that people are not equal within organisations in all sorts of ways — not least of all, they do not get paid the same money. Common sense suggests that managers have more communicative rights than their employees — it is the former who can and indeed must be able to tell their staff to do things. And to do so even if the employees do not like what they are told to do. Otherwise, management of employees would be almost impossible. Thus a possible line of argument therefore might be that there is nothing wrong with the analysed team briefings as they are, they reflect corporate reality.

There are two ways of addressing such an argument, it seems to me. Firstly, it has to do with the explicit declaration of what communication within the University is or should be. The team briefings in question explicitly frame them as part of open communication. The rhetoric does not stand up to the linguistic reality. As argued in the paper there is a hiatus between the declared and the communicated. Thus if the discursive constructions made in the texts cannot be changed because they actually match the reality, then perhaps the declarations should be changed. Why frame something as open if its openness cannot actually be achieved.

But, secondly, I would prefer the view that the analysed team briefings (or, extending the argument, any other texts for that matter) are an example of how their declared function fell short fulfilment because of the language in which they were put. The "new" ideas could not have been formulated in the language of the "old" ideology. The analysis shows the shortcomings of a potentially useful and beneficial exercise in corporate communication. Starting with the macro level of the choice of the communicative event and ending with a close analysis of, for example, lexical use, linguistic analysis can be a powerful tool to enhance the potential success of the message. A planned communicative effort cannot ignore the very form in which it will be brought to life. The above analysis shows ways in which to represent employees as empowered and, on the other hand, the management as — at least in some issues — communicative peers.

Notes:

1 I would like to express my indebtedness to Julia Fowler for making available to me her research on open communication and to Ian Connell for commenting on an earlier version of the paper.

2 The statement appears at the head of every team briefing document.

3 Smythe Dorward Lambert is a firm of Communication Management Consultantswhich is now owned by the US Omnicom Group Inc. In the UK and Europe, it has taken a lead in providing auditing and training services in internal communications to major business organisations. Through the 1990s, the company conducted surveys of the attitudes to, and the amount of investment in, internal communications among "leading" UK companies and public organisations, and it has been particularly active in promoting attention to internal communications within the business community.

4 Named managers responsible for authorship of particular procedures and for conformance to them within the organisation.

5 Group discussions with several categories of staff indicated that several assumed that authorship was either a member of the Directorate, or else the publicity department.

References:

Caldas-Coulthard, Carmen R. and Malcolm Coulthard, eds. 1996. *Texts and Practices.* London: Routledge.

Caldwell, Raymond. 1994. *From a Closed to an Open Style.* Internal Communication Focus 28, 16-17.

Employment Department. 1994. *The Competitive Edge*. Employee Involvement in Britain. London: Employment Dept.

Fairclough, Norman. 1989. *Language and Power.* London: Longman.

Fairclough, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change.* Oxford: Polity Press.

Fowler, Roger, Bob Hodge, Gunther Kress, and Tony Trew, eds. 1979. *Language and Control.* London: Routledge.

Fowler, Roger. 1991. *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. London: Routledge.

Fowler, Roger. 1996. On Critical Linguistics. In C.R. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds.), *Texts and Practices*, 3-14. London: Routledge.

Industrial Society. 1994. *Employee Communication. Managing Best Practice, 1*. Birmingham: Industrial Society.

Marchington, Mick, John Goodman, Adrian Wilkinson, and Peter Ackers. 1992. *New Developments in Employee Involvement.* London: Employment Department.

Middleton, Rupert. 1983. *A Briefer's Guide to Team Briefing [Brochure]*. London: The Industrial Society.

Mühlhäusler, Peter and Rom Harré. 1990. *Pronouns and People: The Linguistic Construction of Social and Personal Identity.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Ng, Sik Hung, and James J. Bradac. 1993. *Power in Language.* Newbury Park: Sage

Royal Society of Arts. 1995. *Tomorrow's Company.* London: Royal Society of Arts.

Smythe Dorward Lambert. 1990. *Your Employees -- Your Edge in the 1990s*. London: Smythe Dorward Lambert.

Smythe Dorward Lambert. 1995. The Changing Role of Internal Communication in Tomorrow's Company. *Perspective, Issue 1*. London: Smythe Dorward Lambert.

Van Leeuwen, Theo. 1996. The Representation of Social Actors. In C.R. Caldas-Coulthard and M. Coulthard (eds.), *Texts and Practices*, 32-70. London: Routledge.

Wilson, John. 1990. *Politically Speaking.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.