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Part I

TALK AND ACTION

I A Discourse on Discourse: Redeeming the Meaning of Talk

Robert J. Marshak

What happens when we think about thought and talk about talk?

Bruner and Feldman, 1990: 237

The end of the twentieth century is witnessing a rapidly growing movement of ideas away from the traditional, objectivist conception of reality towards a still not fully defined, but more subjective, constructionist ontology. Although the objectivist view has been a central part of the privileged dogma of Western philosophy and science since Plato (Finocchiaro, 1990; Soyland, 1994), in the last few decades there has been an impressive outpouring of alternative and ultimately constructionist views. As Laughlin et al. observe:

There have emerged at least two principal themes from this revolutionary readjustment of view: (1) a shift away from a fragmented, mechanical, non-purposive conception of the world toward a holistic, organic, and purposive conception . . . ; and (2) a shift away from a concern with objectivity toward a concern with subjectivity – that is, with the role of perception and cognition in the process of scientific inquiry. . . (1992: 5)

A central aspect of this shift has been increased inquiry into the role of language in the ongoing creation of 'reality'. For example, according to Hall and Ames:

The transition from modern to postmodern perspectives is not merely a theoretical shift. It entails a vast network which has drawn together in a single mix movements as seemingly diverse as deconstruction, the new historicism, cultural studies, and feminist criticism – all of which at one level or another are rooted in the critique of the rationality of language. (1995: 145-6)

The growing interest in, and indeed legitimacy conferred upon, metaphor in recent years is another clear and specific indicator of this shift (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Leary, 1990; Ortony, 1993). In the administrative sciences, despite attempts to uphold the objectivist view (Bourgeois and Pinder, 1983; Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982; Tsoukas, 1992), metaphor has become an area of legitimate and serious inquiry (Grant and Oswick, 1996; Marshak, 1996; Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1997; Oswick and Grant, 1996; Palmer and Dunford, 1996). The emerging outlines of a field or school of inquiry more broadly focused on 'organizational discourse', marked in part by the publication of this book, is another indicator of this trend. There is now a growing, if still quite eclectic, group of scholars actively asking questions, doing research and communicating their ideas about the impacts of linguistically mediated experience in management and organizational settings (Combes et al., 1996). For this group of people talk is more than simply a means to communicate, report or, through sophistry, manipulate information. Instead, talk is one, if not the primary, means of socially constructing reality; privileging some stories, narratives or accounts of that reality over others; and generating alternative conceptions of both proper questions and their answers (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Bergquist, 1993; Schön, 1993). Put simply, the real action is in the talk.

This perspective, however, runs counter to not only the objectivist views of other social scientists, but the embedded 'folk models' or 'folk theories' of many managers in organizations in the United States, and possibly many other countries as well. According to Lakoff:

Ordinary people without any technical expertise have theories, either implicit or explicit, about every important aspect of their lives. Cognitive anthropologists refer to such theories as *folk theories* or *folk models*. (1987: 118)

If one listens with an ethnographer's ear to day-to-day management discussions, notes the terminology of popular management terms and theories, and reflects on broader cultural themes, a very different assessment of talk and its relationship to action is revealed. Implicit in most discourses, and the broader culture, are assumptions that signal the paramount importance of action over talk. There is, in short, a strong 'bias for action' (for example, Peters and Waterman, 1982). Characteristics of 'action', such as being observable, measurable, concrete, practical and specific, are routinely lauded over those associated with 'talk', which is considered to be more contextual, interpretative, elusive, abstract and emotional. The traditional American cultural icon is the 'strong, silent type', exemplified in popular culture by the action-adventure hero (for example, Eastwood, Schwarzenegger, Stallone) who says little, but gets things done by letting his 'fists do the talking'. This contrasts with another icon, 'the loquacious type', best exemplified in popular culture by the talk show host/hostess whose role is to amuse, empathize and/or entertain. That the bias for action over talk may also extend to a bias for the masculine over the feminine should be obvious.

The remainder of this chapter will explore in more detail the everyday discourse and implicit folk model(s) about 'talk' and 'action', articulate a broader conception of talk to include three types of talk and an alternative folk model, and conclude with a discussion of some of the implications for organizations and the emerging field of organizational discourse.

The Rhetoric About Talk and Action

As implied by the opening discussion, developing and legitimating a field of inquiry based on the importance of organizational discourse ('talk') may have more than a few difficulties to surmount. These include the weight of a Western philosophical tradition that cautions against the illusion of sophist rhetoric, as well as an objectivist scientific tradition that prefers literal or mathematical statements to anything that might reflect subjective, mediated experience. Talk is the province of the poet not the philosopher-scientist. Talk is more about rhyme than reason; emotion not fact.

The legitimacy and importance of organizational discourse as a field of inquiry is also challenged by the embedded folk model(s) about 'talk' and 'action' expressed in the daily rhetoric of most (American) organizations. In these implicit models talk is routinely demeaned and devalued, with potentially serious, but unacknowledged consequences. Action, on the other hand, is highly lauded and valued. Not only is action valued over talk, but talk is implicitly considered as an impediment to action; something that must be 'gotten over', 'gone through' or 'finished with' before there can be any action. It is instructive to take a closer look at some of this rhetoric and the model(s) it implies.

First, *talk is worthless*. Expressions conveying a sense that talk has no real value are commonplace. How often have we heard: 'talk is cheap'; 'it's just empty words'; 'idle talk, idle chatter'; or that 'talk is a waste of time'? And, because everyone knows that 'time is money', if talk is a waste of time, it must also be a waste of money. Remember, 'silence is golden'.

On the other hand, *action counts; action is valued*. We are routinely reminded that 'it's deeds that count, not words', or that one should 'watch what we do, not what we say'. People in organizations are admonished to 'walk the talk', guard against 'too much talk and not enough action', engage in 'less talk and more action', and to avoid being seen as 'all talk and no action'.

Not only is action valued over talk, but *talk must stop for action to start*. We are frequently told in meetings and discussions that we need to 'stop talking and start doing something' or that 'it's time to stop all the talk and get down to business'. Finally, we all know that 'if everyone would just stop talking, maybe we could get something done'.

The *bias for action* is also demonstrated by such commonplace terms in the workplace as: 'action lists', 'actionable issues' and 'to do lists'. The professional literature is not exempt from a bias for action either, at least in

nomenclature, for example 'action science', 'action research' and 'action learning'. Consequently it would not be unusual to attend a management meeting where after the participants engaged in some 'action research' or 'action learning' they proved the event was not a waste of time by developing a detailed 'to do list' with specific 'action items' assigned to accountable persons so that everyone would know 'who was to do what by when'. Meetings that fail to generate any or enough specific action items are routinely dismissed as having been 'all talk and a waste of time'.

Underlying Folk Model(s) About Talk and Action

Underlying these common expressions would appear to be implicit conceptions about the nature and interrelationship of talk and action. These implicit constructs, or folk theories/folk model(s), have powerful influences over everyday experience. The critical question, then, becomes: what conceptions or folk model(s) related to talk and action would lead to the conclusions that talk is worthless, action counts, talk must stop for action to start, and, consequently, to a strong bias for action over talk?

First, we note that talk and action are conceived of as disjoint entities. There is something called talk and something else called action with no apparent overlap between them. Either one talks, which is worthless, or acts, which really matters. In no cases do the everyday expressions imply that talk and action occur simultaneously in the same time and place, for example 'if everyone would stop talking maybe we could start doing something'. At any point in time the expressions imply you either have the one or the other. Furthermore, not only are talk and action disjoint entities, but they are separated in time as well as space. Talk precedes action; action follows talk. They also occur in a linear sequence: from talk to action. Finally, the sequence is uni-directional, with talk always preceding and sometimes leading to action. The reverse direction is mostly or totally absent in everyday workplace conversations. We simply do not hear people being told to 'stop getting things done so we can start talking', or that 'we should stop all the action so we can have a good discussion'. On the few occasions when people are asked to 'stop working so we can talk things over', the purpose of the talk is to (again) lead to *doing* things better. In sum, the constructs underlying many of our everyday expressions imply a folk theory where talk and action are separate entities, disjoint in time, space and value. Furthermore, the preferred sequence of events over time is to quickly move from, or through, talk in order to get on to the more valuable action. Talk can also be an implicit impediment or barrier preventing action, for example: 'getting stuck in too much talk', 'spinning our wheels in endless debate' or 'getting sidetracked in long-winded discussions'.

The Path-Goal Image Schematic

At this point it is hard not to notice the similarities between these constructs and the path-goal image schematic extensively discussed in the research of

the cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson (see, for example, Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). An 'image schematic' is essentially a pre-conscious, cognitive analogue that functions as a 'template' to order experience. According to Johnson:

Image schemata exist at a level of generality and abstraction that allows them to serve repeatedly as identifying patterns in an indefinitely large number of experiences, perceptions, and image formations for objects or events that are similarly structured in relevant ways. Their most important feature is that they have a few basic elements or components that are related by definite structures, and yet they have a certain flexibility. As a result of this simple structure, they are a chief means for achieving order in our experience so that we can comprehend and reason about it. (1987: 28)

The path-goal image schematic always has the same pattern or structure: there is (i) a source or starting point, (ii) a destination or goal, and (iii) a path of contiguous locations connecting the starting point to the destination. Moreover, the further along the path you go, the more time has passed since starting (see Johnson, 1987: 113-17). This particular image schematic is ubiquitous, especially in the analogy *life is a journey* which helps explain why such terms as *forks* in the road (choice), *getting over* traumatic events (obstacles on the path), *mapping* out one's life (setting the course), and so on, can make analogical if not logical sense.

Reviewing how talk and action are described in everyday expressions against the path-goal image schematic reveals a great deal of correspondence and coherence. While inaction may be the source or starting point, talk is certainly at an early point on the path towards the destination or goal of action. After all, isn't talk supposed to lead to action? As a location(s) along the path to action, talk can take on several analogical or metaphorical characteristics. For example, talk can be a necessary stage or state that one must pass through in order to get to action; or an impediment or obstacle that can bog things down or get you stuck; or where you can get side-tracked or lost. Because the goal, or what is valued, is the destination of action, one should not waste too much time along the way 'in talk'. Thus many of our most common expressions and implicit valuations of talk and action seem rooted in an underlying folk model based on the path-goal image schematic. This folk model implicitly structures talk and action as: (i) separate states, disjoint in time and space, (ii) where talk is an initial or earlier location(s) on a path or journey (iii) to the goal or destination of action, and (iv) where talk must be gone through, gotten over or finished before one is able to move on to the goal of action. In this folk model talk at best helps lead to action and at worse can block or prevent one from getting to action.

Expanding the Folk Model

Once revealed, it is easy to see how this folk model or image schematic may structure the rhetoric about talk and action as well as the implicit and explicit

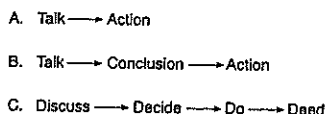


FIGURE 1.1 Linear paths of talk and action

language and metaphors used in that rhetoric. This becomes even clearer as we add in some other aspects of the folk model. One is the role of 'conclusion' as the transition 'point', 'state' or 'bridge' between talk and action. Conventionally, conclusions are where the talking stops and action begins. First we talk, then we 'reach' a conclusion, and after that we begin action. Reaching a conclusion is usually considered to be the last 'step' before starting to act. When all the talk has ended and a conclusion has been reached, it is then time to 'get on' to action. Thus a conclusion must be reached as a key milestone along the way to achieving the action destination. This is shown in Figure 1.1 (A and B).

When only talk, conclusions and action are considered, talk tends to be located as an early or beginning point leading to a conclusion, followed immediately by action. This linear sequencing places action at the end of the path as the final destination or goal of the journey. The end result we want is action, not a return to more talk. So strong is this orientation that action can literally become an end unto itself. 'We don't care what you do, just stop talking about it and do something!' 'Just get on with it!' This tends to obscure some other everyday injunctions about not making action the goal of the journey. We are also reminded to avoid aimless or meaningless action. When these injunctions are added to the folk model of talk and action they imply that action, too, is a point or location along a path leading to a desired goal or outcome. Thus our actions lead to our outcomes.

The expanded folk model suggests a linear sequence moving from talk to a conclusion, followed by action(s) that leads to an outcome. Modifying our descriptors for purposes of alliteration we now have the implicit folk model of Discuss-Decide-Do-Deed. This is shown in Figure 1.1 (C).

This sequence occurs in time and space with each step along the way bringing us closer to our goal. Because the outcome or goal is what is valued, the steps along the way also connote gradations of worth. Action(s) that leads directly to our desired outcomes is most valuable; aimless action(s) is not. Talk, which is at the beginning or an earlier point of the journey, farthest away from the desired outcome, is hardly worth anything at all.

Based on this analysis it appears clear that many of our everyday discussions at work reflect an implicit theory about talk and action wherein action is exalted and prized, while talk is routinely demeaned as worthless or an impediment to action. The rhetoric reveals not only the strong bias for action, but a powerful folk model implicitly at work in many organizations.

This has implications in the work setting, as will be discussed later, but also for the emerging field of organizational discourse.

Redeeming the Meaning of Talk

As long as the rhetoric about talk and action, as well as conclusions and outcomes, is implicitly ordered by an underlying path-goal image schematic, or folk model, talk will continue to be demeaned. Unless, or until, an alternative model comes into use, talk in most organizations may continue to be, implicitly at least, not much more than idle chatter. This, of course, impacts on the nascent field of organizational discourse. Put simply, given the folk model described so far, can a field devoted to organizational 'talk' ever be taken seriously? It seems hard to escape the conclusion that without another folk or formal model it will be difficult to legitimate organizational discourse as an important field of inquiry, especially as compared to anything related to addressing organizational action(s). Maybe the field will need to be marketed as 'action discourse' or 'discursive action' to imply it is part of the 'real' action and therefore worthwhile.

Towards Another Model

As we have seen, in an implicit path-goal folk model where action is considered to be the goal or leading directly to the goal, talk will be devalued and demeaned. We have also noted that although action in general is highly valued, aimless or meaningless action can also be disparaged. This suggests a two-part approach to redeeming the value of talk. The first part is to reassert the function of talk in providing meaning, and specifically imbuing action with meaning. The second is to link such a theory of meaningful action with an image schematic different from the path-goal one.

In the first part, we will need to side with the constructionists and assert that actions are behaviours devoid of meaning until redeemed by talk. Talk, in the form of narratives, stories, accounts, and so on, interprets what actions mean and thereby performs an evaluative function. To be meaningful an action(s) must be evaluated as producing a 'significant outcome'. Such interpretative evaluations are created and applied through 'talk'. In essence talk makes action meaningful by turning behaviours and outcomes into 'deeds' worthy of recognition and commentary (Starbuck, 1985; Weick, 1995). Actions may or may not be purely objective, empirical events. What those actions mean and how worthwhile they are, however, is inherently subjective and based on what we say about them.

Types of Talk

To advance this proposition further requires the development of a way of talking about 'talk'. We must be able to distinguish several types of talk,

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including talk that leads to action, and talk that makes action(s) meaningful. Three types of talk are proposed with labels intended to convey their primary function.

The first type is *tool-talk*. Tool-talk includes all instrumental communications required to discuss, conclude, act and evaluate outcomes. It is utilitarian, that is, used to accomplish some purpose. Tool-talk is usually literal, conscious and intentionally objective.

The second type is *frame-talk*. Frame-talk provides the interpretative frameworks and symbols that generate and evaluate the meaning of discussions, conclusions, actions and outcomes (for example, Donnellon, 1996; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996; Goffman, 1974; Schön, 1993). By providing context, frame-talk enables implicit and explicit assessments while also conveying subjective meaning and accomplishment. Frame-talk usually includes symbolic, conscious, pre-conscious and contextually subjective dimensions.

The third type is *mythopoetic-talk*. Mythopoetic-talk conveys the ideogenic ideas and images (for example, myths, cosmologies, *logos*) that create and communicate the nature of reality within which frameworks and symbols are applied. It creates and communicates the privileged narratives that guide frame-talk and tool-talk within a particular culture or society. Mythopoetic-talk is usually mythic and metaphorical; conscious, pre-conscious, and unconscious; and intuitive and mystical.

This three-part typology is not intended to imply rigid categorization of types of talk. Rather it is more a fuzzy delineation or gradation intended to distinguish the different functional contributions of what would otherwise be the undifferentiated term 'talk' (Lakoff, 1987: 21-2; Zadeh, 1965). Talk, of course, in this context implies both oral and written forms of communication, discourse, narrative, account, and so on. It should also be noted that two-part delineations between talk and 'meta-talk' have been made by others concerned with the practical aspects of discourse (for example, Nierenberg and Calero, 1973; Tannen, 1986, 1990). In their usage, meta-talk is the hidden meaning beyond or behind the literal words. Meta-talk involves paying attention to or listening for unarticulated assumptions, contextual relationships, symbolism, and so forth. While by no means equivalent to the formulation presented here, meta-talk is more like frame-talk, with some possible overlap with mythopoetic-talk. What is clearly consistent in both typologies, however, is the desire to invent a special form of the word 'talk' that conveys the power to create and convey meaning beyond literal, instrumental language.

Cycles and Containers of Meaning

As somewhat implied by their names, tool-talk is contained or framed by frame-talk, and frame-talk is contained or informed by mythopoetic-talk. This is shown in Figure 1.2. Furthermore, not only are the three types of talk related to each other through containment, but they also re-create and

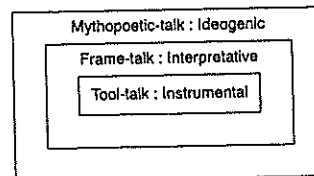


FIGURE 1.2 Types of talk

reinforce each other in ongoing cycles of meaning, interpretation and events. This is shown in Figure 1.3. Mythopoetic-talk creates the fundamental ground of ideas which are then selectively used through frame-talk to set the context or interpretation within which tool-talk occurs. The outcomes or deeds resulting from tool-talk are then interpreted or evaluated through further frame-talk in terms of how well they do or do not meet the fundamental premises established by mythopoetic-talk. To the degree that frame-talk can successfully interpret or provide meaning to the outcomes or deeds, it will also reinforce and uphold the legitimacy and validity of the

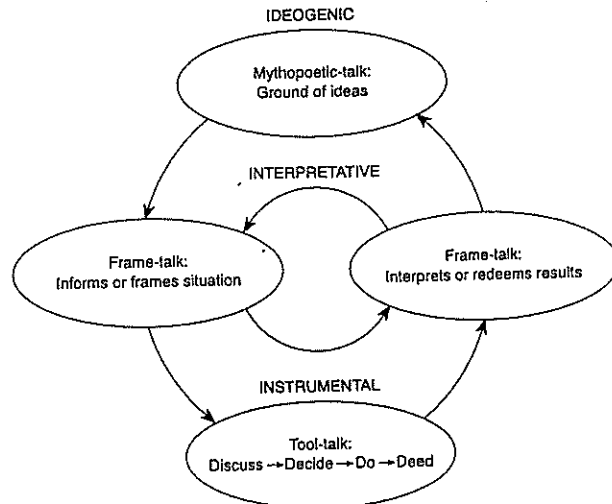


FIGURE 1.3 Containers of talk and cycles of meaning

ideogenic ideas conveyed by mythopoetic-talk. Thus we have a system of talk that has self-referencing cycles and containers of meaning:

Cosmological understanding is depicted in symbolic dramas that in turn lead to individual experiences, which are then interpreted within the framework of the cosmology that first produced the experience – thus completing a 'cycle of meaning'. (Laughlin et al., 1992: 335)

There are two aspects of this model of talk and action that importantly, for our purposes, distinguish it from the previously discussed path-goal folk model of talk and action.

First, talk and action are not conceived of as separate, independent entities. Instead talk *contains* action. Following the container metaphor (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987), the action is *in* the talk. Frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk form containers of meaning within which action occurs and takes on significance. Actions themselves are meaningless until interpreted in the context of the frame and foundations provided by frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk. In that sense all action is bound, contained and embedded within the 'cage' of language (Wittgenstein, 1968). Because, metaphorically, buildings are a form of container (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), frame-talk about social *constructionism* (Foucault, 1972) or *deconstructionism* (Derrida, 1978, 1982) is coherent within the mythopoetic-talk of constructionist philosophy and science. Thus a shift to a containment image-schematic regarding talk and action seems also to be a prerequisite for most postmodern perspectives.

Second, talk and action do not form a linear sequence ending in action or some outcome(s). Rather they are linked in self-referencing cycles of meaning and experience. Mythopoetic-talk establishes the fundamental set of ideas that frame-talk applies selectively to form the interpretative context within which tool-talk addresses a particular issue. Any resulting actions and outcomes are then evaluated through further frame-talk in terms of how well the actions and outcomes fit/support a prevailing set of fundamental ideas. When actions and outcomes are interpreted by frame-talk as fitting or supporting the fundamental ideas, the cycle of meaning is reinforced, thereby continuing the cycle of self-referencing talk, meaning and action. A cyclical image schematic, wherein linked entities or events form circular relationships, is also clearly part of most postmodern perspectives in all the sciences (Capra, 1982, 1996; Maturana and Varela, 1980, 1987).

The proposition of this argument, then, is that a shift from an implicit path-goal, linear folk model of talk and action to a formal and/or folk model(s) based on cyclical and container image schematics will be a necessary condition for the redemption of talk in comparison to action. Such a shift will also be required to help establish and support the appropriate formal and informal theoretical constructs upon which to build a meaningful field of organizational discourse (for example, see Munro, 1988, for a discussion of the crucial importance of metaphorical or structural images in

Chinese philosophy). Talk would thereby be re-located from a position implicitly distant, removed and secondary to action to a more immediate, encompassing and meaningful relationship with action.

An illustration: The Great Chain of Being

At this point it is perhaps appropriate to attempt to provide greater elucidation to the discussion of types of talk and containers and cycles of meaning. This will be done through a brief exposition of a set of mythopoetic concepts that are collectively known as 'the Great Chain of Being':

We shall first discriminate not, indeed, a single and simple idea, but three ideas which have, throughout the greater part of the history of the West, been so closely and constantly associated that they have often operated as a unit, and have, when thus taken together, produced a conception – one of the major conceptions of Occidental thought – which came to be expressed by a single term: 'the Great Chain of Being'. (Lovejoy, 1936: 20–1)

According to Lovejoy and others, 'the Great Chain of Being is rooted in Platonic and Neoplatonic thinking, though adopted by Christians for most of their history in order to relate perfect spirit to imperfect matter' (Hardy, 1987: 112). The image of the concept is simple, powerful and implicitly familiar to almost any Western reader. There is a transcendent perfect good, or perfect God, at the apex of the universe and the most imperfect, most mutable, primitive matter (or devil) at the bottom. In between, arranged in descending order of perfection, is everything in the universe: angels, humans, animals, plants, slugs, and so on. From saints to sinners, 'higher' to 'lower' forms of life, the ideal to the gross and base, everything has its place in the Great Chain of Being.'

This image is created and supported by three principal ideas set in the context of the assumption of a transcendent, perfect, ideal good or God. Those three ideas are: (i) plenitude, (ii) continuity and (iii) unilinear gradation. As Lovejoy explains, plenitude is the concept that everything that is possible exists; continuity, that everything is contiguous without gaps, empty spaces or vacuums; unilinear gradation, that everything is ordered in a hierarchy from most to least perfect, ideal, spiritual, good. Taken together, these concepts easily engage and evoke such ascent-descent image schematics and metaphors as great chains, ladders, levels and staircases.

Thus the ideogenic conception of the Great Chain of Being provides us with a universe ordered in levels from top to bottom, where one's place denotes degrees of goodness, perfection and/or accomplishment. As Lovejoy richly documents, this set of ideas permeates the mythopoetic-talk of the Western tradition. Examples include the perfect creator who filled the universe with everything possible in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*, and Dante's precise demarcation of the rings and levels between the lowest and

highest parts of the universe, from the depths of Hell to the pinnacle of the Godhead in the *Divine Comedy*.

The mythopoetic-talk that creates and re-creates the primal image of the Great Chain of Being also provides the context or ground for how frame-talk positions problems and possibilities. This will be demonstrated through two examples: one biological, the other organizational. First, for the biological example:

No history of the biological sciences in the eighteenth century can be adequate which fails to keep in view the fact that, for most men of science throughout that period, the theorems implicit in the concept of the Chain of Being continued to constitute essential presuppositions in the *framing* of scientific hypotheses. (Lovejoy, 1936: 227; emphasis added)

Hence, the mythopoetic-talk that first creates a chain of being provides implicit legitimacy and coherence to frame-talk that might 'set naturalists to looking for forms which would fill up the apparently "missing links" in the chain' (Lovejoy, 1936: 231). This would then be followed by the appropriate tool-talk required to instrumentally search for new and/or missing species. The act of discovering a previously unknown life form might then be interpreted through frame-talk as finding a *missing link*, thereby reinforcing the original conception that there is a Great Chain of Being encompassing all possible beings. As Lovejoy points out,

Every discovery of a new form could be regarded, not as the disclosure of an additional fact in nature, but as a step towards the completion of a systemic structure of which the general plan was known in advance, an additional bit of empirical evidence of the truth of the generally accepted and cherished scheme of things. (1936: 232)

Support for the primal conception would then provide encouragement for the continued framing of situations, experiences and hypotheses in terms of hierarchical forms, missing links and the like. Furthermore, little or none of this would occur explicitly; instead the concepts would be implicitly embedded in how people talked, literally and figuratively, about the universe. A schematic showing the pattern of containers and cycles of meaning for this and the next example is provided in Figure 1.4.

Staying within the container provided by the mythopoetic image of the Great Chain of Being, but switching focus from biology to organizational behaviour, reveals similar types of talk and containers and cycles of meaning. Take, for example, the metaphorical framing of personal organizational success in terms of 'climbing a ladder'. There are job ladders, career ladders and corporate ladders of success. One attempts to avoid getting stuck at too low a level, or otherwise plateaued or topped-out. Instead, success is measured by how fast and how far you climb the ladder. The fast track is not horizontal, it's vertical. Those at the top are presumed to be somehow wiser, smarter, better and/or more talented than those at successively lower levels.

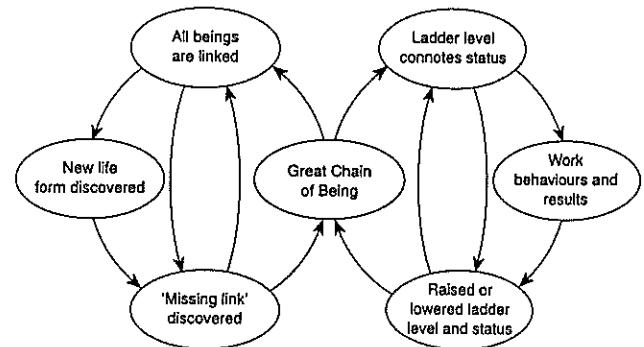


FIGURE 1.4 The Great Chain of Being: missing links and ladder levels

An exception is when you didn't advance on your own but were 'kicked upstairs'. Where one is stationed in the organizational hierarchy matters, therefore, as an indicator not only of role and responsibility, but of existential and status levels as well. Tool-talk about how to succeed – what actions to pursue to achieve desired outcomes – is implicitly formulated within this framework. The resulting actions and outcomes are then interpreted by frame-talk within the context of movement up or down the ladder.

For example, a negative evaluation might lead to a person being characterized as having been knocked down a peg or two, having fallen off the fast track, or having his or her position lowered in the overall scheme of things. Alternatively, a favourable evaluation might be described in terms of someone being elevated, raised up, moved up, advanced a few rungs, or otherwise headed to the top. All of these evaluative framings serve to confer varying degrees of power and status on individuals, thereby reinforcing and reminding people of the importance of location on the Great Ladder of Corporate Success.

The Bias for Action: Some Organizational Implications

The discussion so far has argued that the conventional path-goal folk model of talk and action supports an implicit, but pervasive, bias for action, at least in the United States. A shift to a 'containers and cycles of meaning' folk or formal model(s) would reveal another relationship between action and different types of talk. This relationship would help demonstrate the critical importance of talk in creating meaningful action. It would also be consistent

with a paradigmatic shift from an objectivist, linear, reductionist philosophy to one that is more constructionist, cyclical and relationship-oriented. A viable field of organizational discourse could well depend on such a shift. This would require a change in the mythopoetic- and frame-talk used in the discourses of the administrative sciences.

The bias for action over talk, however, has more than mere philosophical and academic consequences. It also has real consequences for what happens in real organizations. In today's organizations the foci of attention, what's valued, what's rewarded and, therefore, what's done are all biased towards action and away from talk. At first this may seem appropriate, even necessary. After all, aren't organizations created to foster collective action, to do things? The answer, of course, is yes, . . . but. The 'but' serves as a marker to note that there may be some unintended implications, some consequences to privileging action at the expense of talk. One, which we have already noted, is the potential to value and pursue any action, even meaningless or aimless action, to 'spinning our wheels in endless talk *that goes nowhere*'. Another is the potential gender bias created by a folk discourse that implicitly favours strong, silent, linearly oriented action to reciprocal, relationship, and emotionally oriented conversation. When talk is demeaned as relatively worthless, and, if, as it is for some, 'talk is women's work', then the consequences are obvious for women in the workplace. Even the most cursory review of feminist or gender-oriented literature reveals the central importance of how language is constructed and framed for how women (and men) are treated in the workplace (for example, Acker, 1992; Cameron, 1990; Gherardi, 1995; Tannen, 1994b). Other gender and cross-cultural implications should also be considered, including the possibility that the path-goal image schematic is more a preference of Western men than women or people raised in the context of alternative mythopoetic ideas and images (see, for example, Hall and Ames, 1995; Marshak, 1993b, 1994).

The last area of potential consequence to be addressed here has to do with change in contemporary organizations. The transition from the Industrial Age to the Information Age is compelling organizations to pursue new management and organization paradigms and possibilities (Marshak, 1995). The nature of the required changes to established patterns and practices is more transformational or revolutionary in nature than simply maintaining or developing existing capabilities and competencies (Marshak, 1993a). This is forcing organizations and their leaders to rethink fundamental assumptions, theories and practices in the pursuit of competitive success in a global economy. Rethinking, however, demands time on reflection and contemplation, to *talking* to oneself and others to discover the implicit frameworks that may be constraining innovation and adaptation. Rethinking, reflection and contemplation are therefore analogically and metaphorically related to 'talk', at least first-cousins if not siblings. The same or similar folk stigmas also seem to apply, whether the talk is with others or oneself through 'talk-in-the-mind'. For example, psychology is nothing more than 'mind games'; theorizing is 'fine in the abstract, but not in practice'; thinking and

rethinking run the risk of 'analysing too much'; reflection is 'navel gazing'; and contemplation is just 'staring at the ceiling'. None are described as *doing* anything worthwhile, and most as valueless, *inactive*, wastes of time and therefore money.

At the same time, the professional and popular literatures related to organizations and organizational change have reflected an increasing interest in theories and techniques related to rethinking, reflection, contemplation and learning in organizations. These include theories and concepts related to single-loop, double-loop and triple-loop learning (Argyris, 1982, 1990, 1993; Argyris and Schön, 1974, 1978; Nielsen, 1993); reflective practice (Schön, 1983); sense-making (Weick, 1995); learning organizations (Senge, 1990); and dialogue as 'a process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular, the thinking that lies beneath it' (Isaacs, 1993a: 25; also see Bohm, 1989; Isaacs, 1993b; Schein, 1993). All of these approaches are more consistent with a containers and cycles of meaning model of talk and action rather than a linear, path-goal model. All must also deal with the countervailing managerial folk wisdom that such concepts are perhaps interesting or entertaining in theory, but in reality only action counts. Thus, in the United States at least, while having their adherents and places of application, few or none of these approaches have acquired the same status of centrality as the theories and methods that promise or promote tangible actions in pursuit of a goal. Interestingly, and possibly as a result of competing with the 'only action counts' folk wisdom, many of the promoters of these concepts have packaged or framed them with action, not talk, as the central reference point. Presumably, talk, by itself, doesn't sell. For example, there is action-learning, knowledge-in-action, action-reflection-learning, reflection-in-action, and the promise that 'dialogue . . . is at the root of *all* effective group action' (Schein, 1993: 42).

The paradox facing many leaders and organizations, then, is that there is a clear and compelling need to talk about, think about and confront the prevailing assumptions and taken-for-granted practices that are constraining organizational success in the Information Age. This requires reflection about the containers and cycles of meaning that restrict current thinking and action, including the frame-talk and mythopoetic-talk that are keeping management thinking 'in-the-box'. At the same time, there has been a profusion of formal theories and techniques to help leaders and managers address fundamental ways of thinking and knowing. Nonetheless, such approaches are still not considered mainstream, and it is difficult to get most managers to spend much time in reflective discourse. Instead, they are usually anxious and agitated to 'get on with it', to 'stop talking and move into action', because 'there is no time to waste'. They are, after all, responsible, 'action-oriented' managers.

The analysis here suggests that one culprit behind this apparent paradox may be the folk model that talk is worthless, action counts, and talk must stop for action to start. In short, the power of this culturally based folk model

may covertly undermine the overt logic of the formal theories and competitive challenges (Marshak and Katz, 1997). *Your* formal theory may claim that talk is critical, but *my* folk model keeps telling me that 'talk is cheap and only action counts'.

Closing Comments

The primary purpose of this discussion has been to highlight the dimensions and impacts of the implicit folk models about talk and action. Moreover, the chapter has argued that a viable field of organizational discourse is timely, needed and not open to serious debate. When all is said and done, however, the viability of organizational discourse may well rest on whether or not we are able to leave the action trail and redeem the meaning of talk – for as we have seen, the everyday talk about talk is not favourable, leaving it with a tarnished and questionable reputation. All of this presents a major challenge for the nascent field of organizational discourse. Clearly there are many folk prejudices that will need to be overcome in order to establish discourse as a serious and central part of contemporary management and organizational narratives.