



## Text, Plurality and Organisational Knowledge / I Like to Write About Organisations

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### abstract

The paper discusses how genres of writing are practices that writers engage in to stage authority by presenting knowledge in conventional forms. What is argued is that writing cannot neutrally represent 'reality' but rather that, through genre, writing itself constructs the reality that it purports to represent. Focussing on narrative and storytelling approaches to Organisation Theory, the paper proposes a narrative approach to writing about organisation that accounts for power and authorship. This is done through a theorisation of the 'heteroglossic' organisation – one that suggests that organisations can be conceived as a range of different generic textual practices that simultaneously represent different points of view and different ways of expressing those points. The paper concludes by suggesting that by taking a heteroglossic perspective, an understanding of writing about organisations can accept that rather than portraying their essential characteristics, research texts exist amongst the many competing claims to organisational knowledge. The paper is written in two parallel streams. The first seeks to explicate a theory of writing described above. The second seeks to problematise this explication on its own terms and to demonstrate some of the ironies that emerge from writing about writing.

I like to write.

I like to write about organisations.

I like to write about writing.

Who am I?

People who write about organisations tell stories; they recount events, they reconstruct experience, they reformulate opinions and they try to tell readers about what is going on. It is in the telling of these stories that meaning is made and it is these stories which are the embodiment of both organisational knowledge and knowledge about organisations. In creating these stories, writers have available to them a range of writing strategies and these different ways

*The I that writes the text...is never more than a paper-I.  
(Barthes, 1977: 161)*

*Hello, I am another 'I', an I deeply sceptical of that one writing over on the left there. I'm going to try to keep up with that I, to question it and to keep it in check. That I often does not*

of writing are important to the way that knowledge is staged. As writers create textual images of organisations and the people within them, they impose meaning on experience. Writing is not a neutral conduit for meaning, it actively constructs that which it ostensibly seeks to represent – it is central to the nature of knowledge. This paper intends to highlight and problematise this centrality of writing to the practice of organisational research and subsequently to theorise a model of organisation which can account for the importance of writing.

The paper is developed in three parts. The first part discusses the relationship between language and knowledge. It starts by reviewing how genres of writing are practices, which writers engage in to stage authority by presenting knowledge in conventional forms. What is argued is that writing cannot neutrally represent ‘reality’ but rather that writing itself constructs the reality that it proposes to represent. The second part of the paper examines how narrative and storytelling approaches to Organisation Theory have addressed these issues of power in the writing of organisations. In order to further develop a narrative approach to writing about organisation that accounts for power, the third part of the paper develops a theorisation of the ‘heteroglossic’ organisation. This is based on the concept of heteroglossia as introduced and developed by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). This concept refers to an understanding of the social world as being comprised of a multiplicity of ‘languages’, which struggle with each other to make meaning out of the world. Based on this, society and organisations can be conceived as a range of different textual practices that simultaneously represent different points of view and different ways of expressing those points. The paper concludes by suggesting that by taking a heteroglossic perspective, an understanding of writing about organisations can accept that rather than portraying their essential characteristics, research texts exist amongst the many competing claims to organisational knowledge. Writing about organisations is then ironically relativised against its alternatives and writers can develop an ironic humility about the nature of their products.

*know that this one exists even though I am here so close – separated by a margin and a line it’s easy for me to be hidden away. This margin is important to me, in a way it helps make me – you’ll notice that one of my distinguishing characteristics is that I take up less space than he does – I am in the margin both figuratively and literally. You see I write in a different way to him – one that I don’t think is necessarily expected in this genre of the academic paper. I am marginal. I’m not complaining about this marginality though – if I wasn’t marginal I wouldn’t be me. I am both written in the margin and have been written into the margin. It is my fate to be marginal – I don’t think I could write like this if I wasn’t. But anyway – here I am and I’m going to run alongside. Despite my marginality I’ve got one big advantage, I can read that I’s stuff, but he can’t read mine!*

*It is worth noting here that I am more open about my Iness than he is. In fact, he doesn’t even refer to himself as an I. I have seen this avoidance of an explicit I in a lot of academic writing, and I find it interesting how it tries to position the text (internally) as being independent of a writing subject. To my way of thinking, though, the I is still there. What I mean here is that the absence of his I, does not extinguish the author, but rather creates the author in a particular way. Derrida calls this the “effect of signature” (Derrida, 1982: 328) where the*

### Language, Genre And Knowledge

This paper starts from the premise that writing is central to how we understand, theorise and research organisations. It has been claimed that despite this centrality of writing to the practice of research, organisational theorists have “largely ignored questions of how we enter the lifeworlds of our subjects, how we speak about them, how much space we permit their voices in our research, and what consequences our acts of representation might hold for them” (Prasad, 1998: 32). The implication here is that in seeking to understand organisations, researchers have frequently emphasised the display of their own models, theories and experiences to the extent that people who populate those organisations are relegated as voiceless informants whose own representations are eschewed in favour of the researcher’s all encompassing interpretations. Additionally, writers can ignore the way that they write in favour of concentrating on what it is that is written about to the extent that writing strategies are naively understood as conduits of a pre-given and extra-textual meaning. Although in organisation studies, these issues of textuality are becoming increasingly addressed (see for example Linstead, 1999; Czarniawska, 1999; Rhodes, 2001), the conventional avoidance of attention to issues of writing makes it important to question the way that researchers stage authority so as to be able to understand how writing practices create images of organisations in ways that are not explicit in the research text.

In working to understand research and knowledge in organisations, we can start from the view that writing itself is a method of inquiry, but that in such inquiry, no particular genre can claim a privileged form of knowledge (Richardson, 1994). Genres can be described, in this context, as ways of writing which are recognisable to readers as being of a certain kind. A genre is a type of writing that, having been reproduced many times by different writers, has become commonplace and accepted as a way of writing about some phenomena. Genre, then, as a conventionalised form of text, is given rise to by the functions, goals, conventions and rituals which express particular social meanings (Kress, 1985) such that a genre itself has a meaning which operates

*writing itself does not need to refer to the author through the use of an explicit I in order to retain an implied reference to the author. Instead, this reference is achieved by appending a ‘signature’ to the text as a whole – in this case by the presence of my proper name at the title of this paper. This is where I come in, because writing from two Is as is being done in this paper (separated only by the thinly constructed line on your left) is meant to problematise this effect and render it more transparent.*

*Let me tell you about myself. I’m the black sheep of this family. I just don’t want to take all this stuff about organisations so seriously you see. When I see something written down (including re-reading my own writing) I find it hard to believe, hard to take it for granted. I know that that I over there takes himself very seriously – and so do I, in a way, but in a very different way. My seriousness comes from a different place – I like, in my more positive moments, to think of myself as the critical I or the self-reflexive I. Nevertheless, I am concerned about this self-reflexivity. I can’t escape it now that it is here, but it makes life so difficult. It makes writing so difficult. But, you see, I do like writing about organisations, and I like reading about them too, but to be so self-aware can be tiring and troublesome – it draws such a fine line between humility and narcissism. I am tired, but I will go on.*

together with the overt meanings that a text represents.

Because genres are accepted ways of writing which have gained acceptance through repeated and ritualised use, they can also be seen as particular ways that authority is achieved. This suggests that “readers interpret texts as being factual in so far as they encounter appropriate textual conventions which can be read in appropriate ways” (Atkinson, 1990: 36). Textual formats, however, become taken for granted and constrain writing practices to operate within institutionally conventional forms. Texts become ‘proper’ because their genre makes them appear ‘real’ and ‘natural’. These conventional forms, or genres, are then models for writing that gain legitimacy and are plausible with particular readers. Scientific texts, such as those conventional to organisation studies, are themselves based more on credibility than truth. It is through these strategies, as conventionalised in genre, that texts become regarded both as scientific and as being an embodiment of knowledge. Genres can be understood as shared models of representation and interpretation that validate and frame experience (Brown, 1987). This ‘sharedness’ implies that genres do not originate with authors; they draw upon and reproduce the cultural context in which they exist. Generic representations only appear realistic when the genre used has become commonplace; at the extreme, a text “is not convincing because it is realistic; instead it is realistic because we have already been convinced” (Brown, 1987: 148).

Recognising the complicity of genre in constructing plausible knowledge enables a questioning of conventional genres by suggesting new ways of reading the world, which, rather than reconstructing experience in conventional codes, aim to deconstruct convention through new forms of encoding. Such forms of expression de-realise the conventional by questioning the uses of conventions (Brown, 1987). In turn, this attempts to disrupt power by playing with genres of truth. Whereas, textual practices are what constitute our social realities (Atkinson, 1990), creating experimental representations of ‘the world’ can disrupt and question the authority and dominance of those practices.

*By now, that other I has started to write about his intentions and his plans for this paper. All that theorising and academicising about organisations and writing about them, it's a tough job, but my existence will hopefully make it easier for him and I can do a bit of theorising myself. I can worry about some of the stuff that is so hard to fit in to his academic writing. If you learn your writing from being a student, from being an academic and from publishing in academic books and journals, you develop habits that are hard to break – hard to recognise even. He's guilty of that; and so am I at times. But I feel a bit less restrained, more carefree, more at liberty to ramble and to mix genres.*

*I do have a troubled relationship with that other I. He is writing authoritatively, he is building an argument, he is positioning himself to be read as a expert. This is part of his training, it is part of the genre that he has been taught and has been reinforced by teachers gone, by academic colleagues, by journal reviewers and by publishing guidelines. He feels constrained by this but is still somehow trapped in it. His entrapment traps me also but I'm less sure of myself.*

*In writing about writing, and in creating this I, I feel compelled to position myself within this particular paper and within the genre of the academic paper in general – this is what reflexive is like me do, so ... that's what*

Genre is also related to how we perceive the unity of particular texts. Genre is thus a typical form of a written work which is seen as finished and resolved such that genre represents a particular way of constructing a text that comes to be known as the 'whole' (Bakhtin and Medvedev, 1978). The use of genre is a way to control aspects of reality through particular ways of seeing; it is a method for taking charge of and finalising reality. Genre, however, is not avoidable as a way in which realities are constructed and an awareness of them does not allow a writer to operate outside of them. Using genres in research and the formulation of knowledge is a way of validating particular ways of understanding; ways that relate both to the 'what' of the research, and to the 'how' of writing. This is a relation where changing the 'how' unavoidably changes the 'what'.

As authors use genres to depict organisations, language does not act as a mirror for reality, but rather the linguistic and discursive conventions employed by authors are inseparable from the meaning of the text. In turn, the use of genre is related to the way that writers control the meaning of their research through the way they create textual representations of organisations and the people in them – "in texts the discursive differences are negotiated, governed by differences in power, which are themselves in part encoded in and determined by discourse and by genre" (Kress, 1985: 32). These practices are, however, kept hidden in the texts that they produce when texts create an appearance of transparency, where a "found world is assumed communicable in a 'clear' style in which there is no apparent intrusion by language or an embedded researcher" (Lather, 1991: 124). This approach, which naively proposes language to be a transparent medium for expressing reality, hides the role that authorship plays in the power relations of research and knowledge as "each genre constructs positions or roles which the participants in the genres occupy" (Kress, 1985: 37). Language is then the medium that creates rather than reflects the world – reality is never anything but a pre-text for language and authorship and, as such, using language to claim to explain the world is a case of the world's ambiguity being concealed (Barthes, 1977). It is in this concealment that a researcher, as author, can stake a

*I'm going to try to do. Part of my desire to do it this way stems from the fact that, as you will see, or perhaps have already seen, his writing on the left has, as one of its major themes, the role that writing genres have in the production and writing of research. As such, I feel that it is important to make a statement on academic writing as a genre, and where I believe that both this I and that I stand in relation to it. After all, neither of us can write about genre (or anything else) without doing so in some genre or other. The reflexive moment when this is realised can be disturbing as any writing about writing falls under its own critique. This reflexivity is a condition of my writing; it is a given from which I cannot escape and which I (more so than him) have chosen to be explicit about.*

*My choosing to write an academic paper can be seen as an example of what Fuller and Lee (1997) call 'textual collusion'. It is about writing within certain limits because to write that way is set out in the discursive regimes of the academy. Fuller and Lee are talking about student writing, but I think that the same holds for writing papers like this too. The conventions of academic writing hold sway in what appears in journals (some more rigidly than others). This paper, by its nature and its location, is inevitably an academically sanctioned piece of work. For it to have been considered worthy to be published in the journal*

claim to knowledge. Knowledge represented in conventionally accepted genres is less an achievement of a representation of 'reality', and more the exclusion of other possible meanings. Here "the choice of a dominant rhetoric, figure or narrative mode in a text is always an imperfect attempt to impose a reading or range of readings on an interpretative process that is open-ended, a series of displaced meanings with no full stop" (Clifford, 1986: 110) such that each mode of representation enacts a struggle which is both questionable and powerful even if a 'full stop' is insinuated.

Based on the discussion above it can be seen that "the world we know is the world as represented" (Jeffcut, 1994b: 228); further, there is no culture or organisation which can be innocently and accurately represented by observers, but rather the observer creates cultural and organisational fictions through the process of their research. On reflection then, so-called realistic representations become labelled as 'true' not because of correspondence with objects but because they conform to orthodox practices of reading and writing (Brown, 1994). In terms of understanding organised work, the project must then "be focussed on the exploration of paradoxes of textuality in the inscription of order" (Jeffcut, 1994a: 261). Organisation Theory in particular may be conceived of as nothing other than a practice of representation, but the nature of this practice is contrived; it produces an effect of representation and like the painting of an object, the representation is not the object itself (Clegg and Hardy, 1996).

### **Narrative And Organisational Research**

There is a growing body of organisational research which takes a 'storytelling' approach; an approach that has highlighted the importance of narrative ways of knowing both in terms of stories told in organisations and stories told by researchers (De Cock, 1998). These studies "build on a foundation of multidisciplinary research that has shaped the understanding we have of story and storytelling" (Boyce, 1996: 5). Although it has been argued that much of the research in storytelling does not address the orientation of the researcher and that the dynamics of power and meaning are largely

*you are reading, it must have met the conditions, or an interpretation of the conditions, that have been set out in the history of the textual practices associated with academic writing.*

*This issue of collusion is closely related to the notion of 'addressivity' – to whom is the text written. As Fuller and Lee put it, "the notion of addressivity, that knowledge is always directed to someone at some time, is crucial to any analysis of literacy practices within a pedagogical site" (1997: 413). In the pedagogic site where you and I (as the writer and reader of this text) reside, it remains the case that I can't help feeling that I am writing for you, and you are reading from the academy. Within these confines of academic writing in which I operate, I am already constituted in the subject position of the writer, the researcher and the theorist, just as you are positioned as a reader in a particular field and as a potential critic. I can play with these rules, but as long as I choose to call this an academic paper and to publish it in an academic journal, I don't know how to fully break the rules. Surely if I did break the rules it would ultimately mean that this is no longer an academic paper, it would be something else. In some way, I must produce a text that is seen by you as worthy of publication, worthy as a relevant contribution to some knowledge. Textual collusion, in*

unaddressed in the way that stories are positioned (ibid.), there is a growing body of research which does directly address such issues.

In pursuing this line of research, some writers have developed a narrative approach that goes beyond looking at stories as communication and examine stories as textual metaphors through which to understand organisations. This stems from the view that societies, cultures and expressions of experience can be read as texts and that life itself is a narratively produced text (Denzin, 1989). Organisations can thus be understood as socially constructed verbal systems in terms of stories, discourses and texts where each person who is part of the organisation has a voice in the text but where some voices are louder, more articulate and more powerful than others (Hazen, 1993). Any practice of communication in organisations is thus viewed as a text that is read, written and interpreted. Such a textual approach sees the organisation as being constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by its members and others who come in contact with it. This network of 'text' imposes meaning on experience, creates communication between individuals and legitimates patterns of social relationships (Phillips and Brown, 1993). Storytelling in particular is a way that people individually and collectively make sense of their experience and "stories are the blood vessels through which changes pulsate in the heart of organisational life" (Boje, 1991: 8). Building on this one can conceive of the 'storytelling organisation' – and organisation seen as a framework of simultaneously occurring stories (Boje, 1994; 1995). The storytelling organisation is created through the telling and living of collective stories, but where

[t]he storytelling organisation can oppress by subordinating everyone and collapsing everything to one "grand narrative" or "grand story." At the other extreme, the storytelling organisation can be a pluralistic construction of a multiplicity of stories, storytellers and story performance events that are like Tamara but are realised differently depending upon the stories in which one is participating. (Boje, 1995: 1000)

By drawing on narrative theory organisation studies has the potential to create conversations that open up multiple narratives that include the non-conformist

*this sense, is the "enactment of pedagogies, the (re)production of curricular knowledges and the formation of subjects" (Fuller and Lee, 1997: 410). For me to write this paper, and for it to be published and read, I must collude (at least to some degree) with the requirements of academic writing and journal publishing. This paper then, like any other, is a socio-discursive practice, and my collusion is about "moving around inside relations of power" (Fuller and Lee, 1997: 410); relations in which you and I are deeply implicated. The issue I face is about how much I can move around without trespassing into territories outside of those where academic papers must reside so as to ensure that I don't find myself excluded from the academy.*

*Lee (1998) points out that there is a complex relationship between producing knowledge through writing and the production of the subjectivity of a type of knower/writer. I agree with Lee that writing is central to the work of knowledge production and that academic writers (like myself) must learn to (re)produce the writing conventions of a discourse community (represented here by you, my 'preferred reader'). But, what I also want to acknowledge is that while I am indeed colluding with these (re)productive strategies, at the same time I am troubled by them. Writing to you and acknowledging you as the reader here, in this way, is in*

and resist the conventional (Clegg and Hardy, 1996). In this way, as narratives produce identities, the opening up of narrative possibilities to understanding organisations resists the forcing of pre-determined and confining identities on to people. This 'opening up' however is not apolitical and different narrative modes of organising experience are used by people to create different understandings of experience (Law, 1994). As such, organisational experience is understood through the way that it is told – a representation of an organisation becomes one of many competing versions of what the organisation is. Additionally, in this process, choosing a narrative order simultaneously hides other ways of ordering and the conception of the organisation is left as a collection of contrasting and potentially unreconciled stories.

As well as considering organisations as being narrative, organisational theory can also be seen as a practice of storytelling. Indeed sociology, ethnography and organisation studies have long been founded on the ability to tell a good story – a foundation which requires a suspicion of those theories which "seek to subsume everyday accounts to their overwhelming narrative" (Clegg, 1993: 42). This suspicion is wary of modernist grand narratives which try to order all experience yet is respectful of stories embedded in the sites of the social world such that theory can engage in a dialogue with the practices of everyday life. Against this backdrop, reflexive research must place the narrator within the framework of the story and that a greater diversity of organisational theory can be achieved through experimentation with varied writing forms (Hatch, 1996). Such variety can be achieved by applying literary and narrative approaches to research where organisational researchers open up their texts to multiple readings so as to question the authority of authors and to allow both research participants and readers to be involved in the production of research (Putnam, 1996). This opposes the view of the author as an agent in favour of a postmodern decentring of authorship by focussing on the dynamic multiplicity of discourse, text and interpretation.

In looking to storytelling to inform research stories and experiments can coexist in social inquiry as they

*part an example of this questioning. If the writing of an academic paper lays some kind of claim to 'new' knowledge then I suggest that the productive and reproductive elements of the text must always be held in tenuous balance. Don't get me wrong here, though, I am not suggesting separateness of production and reproduction as if this distinction were in any way natural or given; I see the two as co-existing in any form of writing. The issue relates more to the way that productive or reproductive effects are staged in a text. Surely, writing down words is always something new; yet, at the same time, any words I use have always been used before. 'Production' may be most evident in those texts that try to appear unconventional, and 'reproduction' may be most evident in those that adhere more openly to convention. The balance of (re)production is not absolute but rests in the staging of the text; newness can be a matter of 'look'. Thus, in thinking about that I's writing, I am highlighting my concern about the balance that he is able to strike in negotiating textually manifested knowledge claims in the shadow of the conventional rules imposed by the academy. His writing seems so conventional. Nevertheless, he and I both proceed in our attempts to write ourselves into the subject positions of author, writer, knower and theorist simultaneously – it's just that he's over there and I'm in the margin.*



both work to create intersubjectivity in the joint enterprise between the inquirer, the actor and the audience – in this sense, social inquiry is not only informed by the practice of physical scientists, mathematicians and logicians, but “can learn from the art and craft of the novelist, dramatist, journalist, film-maker, soap opera creator” (Butler, 1997: 945) and so forth. Such experimentation suggests that techniques such as fiction, docudrama, journalism and first-person confessionals can be used to write about the shape and texture of organisations and to help others understand them. In such narratives facts are the empirical grounding for plausible narratives; narratives which can generate productive scholarly discourse (Pacanowsky, 1995).

In general then, stories of different genres can be viewed in terms of research being a process of text production (Barthes, 1977) and being represented as narrative knowledge (Lyotard, 1984) where knowledge is a “melting pot in which different linguistic games are combined” (Kallinikos, 1997). In this sense, the textual representation of organisations implies, or at least allows, diverse narrative possibilities. The ‘truths’ offered by scientific research are subject to the limitations and intricacies of narrative representation and do not stand alone as true representations. Thus, the factual is replaced by the representational and the forms of language that we call knowledge are humbled through critical reflection of their own intellectual assumptions.

### **The Heteroglossic Organisation**

In conceiving of an organisation as a multitude of stories and storytelling practices it is important to understand writing about organisations not just in terms of the different stories that can be told, but also in terms of the different ways that those stories can be told, and the different effects made possible these different ways of ‘telling’. Such issues have been directly addressed in literary theory in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981; Bakhtin and Medvedev, 1978) and especially through his concept of heteroglossia. This term is translated from the Russian *raznorecie* meaning ‘variegated speech’. This notion of heteroglossia opposes the view that a

*The rules that he and I allow to govern our writing are the rules of genre. These rules propose, albeit ironically, that “as soon as a genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity” (Derrida, 1980: 56). My text here has announced itself in the genre of academic writing so I must not cross that line – further, it is both through my writing and through your reading that this lack of crossing is to be judged and that the line is (re)drawn. In producing and reading a text as an example of academic writing, I can’t help submitting that it must be judged in relation to genre. But how can such a judgement be made? I like it when Derrida writes, “a text cannot belong to no genre; it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (1980: 65).*

*Here I am trying to play with the genre in the margin. This play has created me – I am the I who can question my Iness. Of relevance here is the way that we two Is are achieved through authorship and through the position in which the writing places the author and narrator of the ‘story’. The I who writes or narrates (that includes him and me) in this sense is not the same thing as a ‘living person’*

single unified language operates in any society and focuses instead on how language is multiplanar and breaks down into different discourses. Indeed heteroglossia is the 'master trope' of Bakhtin's work and reflects an enormous sensitivity to the plurality of experiences and language use in society (Holquist, 1981). The use of the concept of heteroglossia in the context of this paper refers to the differences between the various discursive strata within any language, such that any individual utterance is conceived of as a struggle between convergent and divergent meanings (Clark and Holquist, 1984). Through heteroglossia, a range of competing speech practices operate at any particular point in time, these speech practices representing different points of view of the world and different ways of understanding experience (Stam, 1988). Bakhtin sees the creative interaction of contradictory and differing voices as being opposed to a passive and receptive understanding (Morris, 1984). In language, which is the arena of this interaction, there applies centripetal forces that aim at centralisation and the production of shared meaning used by dominant social groups to impose their own monological and unitary perceptions of truth. Such power works to establish stabilisation on its own terms and thus the exclusion of other possible readings (Gergen, 1995).

Working against this is a centrifugal force which is what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia. This asserts that by suggesting that something is thus, centripetal power can only exist against the possibility of alternatives (Gergen, 1995). It is the existence of these alternatives that marks heteroglossia – a breaking up of a unified image of the world into a multiplicity of linguistically created worlds (McHale, 1987). Through this concept of heteroglossia all monological truth claims are relativised against other views of the world in a way that counters the hegemony of single languages and absolute forms of thought. In this way, authoritative and persuasive social voices become ironically or parodically relativised against other voices within heteroglossia. The centrifugal force of heteroglossia opposes the centralising imposition of the monological world through multi-vocal discourse. Heteroglossia is also "accompanied by polysemy, the proliferation of socially uncontrolled meanings for these voices"

– *I am a 'paper being'. My ideas here have been borrowed to some degree from Roland Barthes when he writes that "the (material) author of the narrative is in no way to be confused with the narrator of that narrative" (Barthes, 1977: 111). The implication that I see is that the I who narrates a story is a function of that story rather than being an independent self who is expressing his/her own views, experience etc. Barthes also suggests that it is language rather than an author that speaks; the author too is "never more than an instance of writing, just like I is nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a 'subject' not a 'person'" (1977: 145). What I am trying to get at here is that in writing (both here and there), different authorial subjectivities can be created through different ways of writing; the author is created by the genre. My I is created through its text. I am not he who writes, I am the I who is written.*

*In considering an author as a function of the text, it seems to follow that the power embedded in writing is not a power exerted by the 'author as person' but a power enacted by the employment of genre and the authors that genre creates. I see a danger in assuming equivalence between the 'person' who writes and the author because it imputes agency into that person – it's just too humanistic. It's this humanism that is achieved, in part, through the assumed*

(Gagnon, 1992: 231). Heteroglossia highlights how the plurality of language is conceived of as a both/and instead of an either/or operation through the centrifugal forces that try to keep things separate, and the centripetal forces that strive to keep them unified (Clark and Holquist, 1984). Bakhtin's insight is how a language is composed of innumerable languages that are based on different experiences and have their own way of understanding and evaluating the world (Morson and Emerson, 1994). Individuals participate in a number of these languages each of which claims a privileged view of the world. The languages of heteroglossia, however, compete with one another as the many 'languages of truth' participate in an unending dialogue with each other and with the experiences they attempt to represent.

Drawing from Bakhtin, it can be conceived that writing about organisations is also characterised by heteroglossia – a multiplicity of languages in unending dialogues of power. These dialogues are manifested in words of real people, whether they call themselves researchers, academics, managers, workers, or whatever there are different ways of telling the organisation's story each of which can be thought of as being borne from a different language. The language of boardroom, the coffee room, the annual report, the pub, the performance review meeting, the academic journal, or the industrial relations bargaining table all write the organisation differently. Further across different points in time and space each language will itself change and be used to different ends. This heteroglossia leads us to the concept of the heteroglossic organisation; a theorisation of organisation that posits that knowledge is diverse and multilingual and that representation can always be achieved through different genres and alternative portrayals. In terms of research this suggests that conventional genres of writing organisation act to suppress the heteroglossia by limiting alternative portrayals – they apply a centripetal force. The power that is exercised in such writing is that which seeks to homogenise all experience into a single account or mode of interpretation. Such an exercise lays claim to centralising all knowledge around a particular way of understanding and writing. The concept of the heteroglossic organisation rejects this centralisation

*equivalence between the 'living person' and the 'paper author'.*

*As a point of interest (at least to me) you may have noticed that early in his text he referenced a book by Bakhtin and Medvedev called The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship. I find this book interesting not just because of what's written in it but because it is what people call one of Bakhtin's 'disputed texts'. What's disputed in particular is whether or not Bakhtin actually was involved in writing it. In fact, there are a number of such disputed texts. Some people think that during the 1920s Bakhtin published a number of books using the names of two of his friends – Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov. Now these aren't made up names, these two people apparently did exist, they did publish books and they were friends of Bakhtin. So, the original Russian version of The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship was published in Leningrad in 1928 under Medvedev's name only. In 1982, a publisher in New York released it again in Russian, but this time the author was cited as being Bakhtin. The English translation he refers to was published in 1978 suggests that the book was co-authored by Bakhtin and Medvedev. What can we make of this? The dispute itself is unresolved with some Bakhtinian 'experts' disagreeing on the matter. So, Michael Holquist (1990) thinks that Bakhtin was primarily responsible for the book, and*

and replaces it with diversity and heterogeneity. It suggests that organisations do not just comprise of different stories but also of different languages and ways of writing; the intersection of the stories and the tellings. The heteroglossic organisation is, then, both multi-vocal and multi-generic.

The concept of the heteroglossic organisation accepts that to write about organisations simultaneously informs and performs, and that information cannot be achieved without the performance. In order to have information about an organisation that information must be represented in a symbolic form; this act of representation is a performance of a text. Without performance there is no information. What this implies is that the stories about organisation do not exist outside of the storytelling and just as an organisation is comprised of multiple stories, so is it comprised of multiple ways of telling them. The heteroglossic organisation then exists as an indefinite matrix of stories and storytelling practices. Further, by foregrounding the role of language in constructing organisation, seeing organisations as heteroglossic attests to the instability of organisational stories and the way that they are told. Stories, then, are not just enactments of different opinions or perspectives, but rather they are part of an unknowable web of meaning that is always in flux and can never be captured and finalised in a text.

Accepting heteroglossia as a feature of organisations draws into question the efficacy of attempts to write about organisations in single genres or through single forms of representation. Such approaches can be dangerous when they suggest that one language can speak for all others through a centrifugal monologisation. What Bakhtin reminds us of is that such authoritative discourse

permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylising variants on it. It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it (1981: 343)

Such language “does not presume alien utterances beyond its own boundaries” (Bakhtin, 1981: 285) and can easily become dogmatic and conservative.

*Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (1990) think that Bakhtin had little to do with the writing of the book. Now I don't want to regurgitate the arguments behind each side of this dispute (you can look up my references if you're really interested!) but, what I do find interesting is thinking about what this dispute implies for authorship. Did he write it or didn't he write it? The dispute itself seems to reflect a more general obsession with being able to make a direct link between an author created through a text and an embodied person. My view is that the writer (by this I mean the embodied person who wrote the book) does not need to be thought of as the author (the authorial subjectivity constructed by the text). Now of course the two aren't independent, but that doesn't mean that they are the same either. There might be truth seekers around the world interested in knowing once and for all if Bakhtin's hand actually held the pen that inscribed the marks that became The Formal Method.... But my concerns are different – I'm not so much interested in who writes a text but am more interested who is written by it.*

*In relation to this, personally, I'm still unsure of who I am as a writer or author, but it seems workable to suggest that the way that authorial subjectivities (such as this I who is writing to you) are created through texts has implications for how an*

At an extreme such authoritative discourse seeks the utopian goal of absolute monologue that suppresses all difference and otherness – a pathology of language that purports to be so compelling that no other discourse is necessary (Holquist, 1990). For Bakhtin, however, such a unitary language is not something given, it is something that is posited. Something that purports to be able to speak the truth of the world in a direct fashion. Bakhtin's heteroglossia proposes that the differences that authoritative discourses aim to suppress cannot (and should not) be resolved. Difference is part of existence and any attempt to unify language or monologise the world can only exist amidst heteroglossia.

Thinking of an organisation as heteroglossic similarly asserts that organisations will always be made up of different languages and different stories which represent different point of view and interpretations. These different stories can be told through in genres and even if one story poses itself as authoritative the others will still not be extinguished. Attesting to heteroglossia brings up questions as to how to account for diversity in writing. Indeed the heteroglossic organisation is one that is conceivable but is not representable – that is to say that we can conceive of the multiplicity but its unfinalisability can never be written down in a text. A conception that proposes that an organisation is made up of many stories in many genres is indeed different from a text that claims it has represented all of those stories in all of those genres. To put forward such a text would always be a failed attempt at monologisation – an attempt to say it all, for all time and for everyone. The paradox that this opens up is that organisations are always being written but at the same time are never Written. That is, a finalising representation or set of representations is always elusive and to say that such a representation has been written is a process of power that closes off competing perspectives and modes of representation. Further, even in the face of a range of competing representations we cannot say that we might know more about an organisation, but rather we can realise that each is a contested claim to speak the 'truth' about the world (Rhodes, 2000). Any text of organisation is woven from the materials at hand into

*awareness of reflexivity might enable this writing to account for the attempts at power of its representations.*

*Chia suggests that*

*what constituted the initial 'reflexive' turn in academic theorising resulted from a heightened self-awareness associated with the increasing realisation that the researcher/theorist plays an active role in constructing the very reality he/she is attempting to investigate. (1996: 79)*

*I'm concerned though that such a reflexivity still assumes an equivalence between the person who writes and the author/researcher; it assumes that it is the researcher who constructs reality. Anne Game (1991) questions this assumption when she writes: "when research is understood as writing, critical attention is drawn to the practice of textual production which is research, as opposed to the final writing of the research 'results'" (Game, 1991: 28). What this leads to (again) is the view that writing generates, rather than being generated by, an authorial subjectivity. Power is therefore created by, rather than expressed through, writing. If I try (uncomfortably and unsuccessfully) to be in control of this text, it's because the text has constructed that control not because of who I am. But, as a reflexive I, I feel desperate yet somehow unable to relinquish these attempts at control.*

*I'm caught in a terrible bind. I*

a fabric that reflects its manufacture – its fabrication as a text. Because the concept of the heteroglossic organisation is one that not only accepts that organisations comprise of an indefinite number of stories, but also an indefinite number of ways of writing them; it suggests a writing of organisation that accounts for a multiplicity of stories and a multiplicity of genres. Such an organisation can, however, never be written; it can never be finalised; it can only be alluded to through the incorporation of unreconciled perspectives and different, possibly experimental, ways of writing.

As Lyotard puts it “we have an idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it” (1984: 78). The notion of a heteroglossic organisation is an example of an idea of the world, but to propose an example of it would be to suggest that we could represent all of the different stories and all of the ways that they are told. The heteroglossic organisation is therefore unrepresentable and each new attempt to present it further demonstrates its unrepresentability. To write the heteroglossic organisation is then a matter of alluding to it while accepting that the goal of representation is unachievable. Writing might then be a matter where “it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be represented” (Lyotard, 1984: 81) such that the terrorist utopia of a reconciliatory unity and totalisation of language is no longer sought.

The challenge that this poses for storytelling and narrative approaches to organisations is the ability to write knowledge whilst at the same time drawing attention to the fact that the knowledge is written. What a narrative approach can offer is a type of knowledge that accepts and exposes the mechanics of its own production through attention to issues of genre and language. This recognises that writing about ‘organisation’ is a way of constructing and reproducing organisational knowledge through the use of textual, narrative and rhetorical practices. Writing creates the organisation through the textualisation of the personal and vicarious experience of the writer; writing is central to organisation and an understanding of organisation must be based on a conceptualisation of writing. In

*feel compelled to tell you not to believe me – to be suspicious of writing, even mine. I realise though, that if you don’t take my advice then you will be, in effect taking it. Similarly, if you do take my advice you effectively need to question it. No doubt, you are capable of reading my text in ways beyond those that I can conceive or suggest, but still I don’t know how to write in a way that really accepts the limitations that I know my writing has. I want to convince you of my argument but my argument is all about being suspicious about what you read. Obviously, I cannot suggest that this suspicion should be of all texts except my own. I’m gridlocked by my own views of writing and it’s hard to figure out how to get out.*

*Of course, this gridlock is of my own invention – I have written myself into it. This reminds me of an experience I had at a conference I went to recently. I was talking about some of the ideas that have informed this paper and at the end a question came from the audience – “Yes, but is your heteroglossia dialogised?” At the time, I was caught off guard and I think I gave some sort of brief and uninspiring answer – nevertheless the question still remains with me. To talk of different voices and genres etc. is fine – surely its obvious that different people will have different points of view and that they won’t agree and that some will try to become dominant. But how might these different points*

this sense, writing is the means by which people define order in their environment through particular structures of representation (Hassard, 1993) such that organisations are a symbolic product that is written (Linstead, 1993) both literally and figuratively. It is this concern about writing which raises doubts about representation and interpretation and calls for a more self-reflexive approach which gives attention to how texts are produced and read and leads to texts which are more open and reflect the ambiguities of both social worlds and worlds of language (Alvesson and Berg, 1992). Organisation is then not a noun but a verb that performs itself (Law, 1994) through the stories told about it. The discourse of organisation is itself an 'organisation of organisation'; that is, writing on organisation is organised by and inextricable from the theory or methodology by which it is framed (Cooper, 1990).

To theorise the heteroglossic organisation is an affirmation of the irony of writing. It is a writing that accepts that it can never accomplish a real writing or a true representation; it is a writing that is continuously relativised against the alternatives that it inevitably suppresses. The possibility for a narrative approach to organisational knowledge that this entails is one that firstly recognises its own play in the suppression of heterogeneity by the ways it limits alternative portrayals and secondly realises that such limitations are insurmountable – this is the irony of writing organisation.

Richard Rorty explores irony in terms of a person's 'final vocabulary' – "the words in which we tell...the story of our lives" (1989: 73). Based on this, to write the heteroglossic organisation is to position oneself as an ironist, who, as defined by Rorty fulfils three conditions:

- (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered;
- (2) she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts;
- (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than other, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a

*of view recognise each other and interact without the intention of manufacturing a hegemonic consensus? After all, all writing would appear to presuppose an other. Unless I write through the madness of an untranslatable idiolect, I must assume that you (the reader) exist and that I have something to say to you. In my case here my intention is not to attempt the futile vanity of creating a text that proposes itself as a finalised monologue. If you've read his text before reading mine you'll know that he's writing about (amongst other things) heteroglossia – about the links and inter relationships between different social languages, different voices and different genres. He thinks that organisations are like this too and that writing about organisations might benefit from an acknowledgment of this heteroglossia rather than trying to write the 'truth'. Again I ask the question that was asked of me – "Is this heteroglossia dialogised?"*

*Now it's pretty obvious that I am aware of his existence – I talk about him all of the time, you might even say that I'm obsessed with him. What I think his problem is though, is that his heteroglossia does not admit to its own dialogism – he can write about heteroglossia, but alone he can't demonstrate it (that's what he needs me for). It's like his genre does not allow him to perform the heteroglossia that he argues for. He's alone, he's building an argument, he's*

neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old. (1989: 73)

The ironist who writes organisation then recognises that any representation they make is always fragile and subject to change and in the very instance of writing is aware that the knowledge being written can be relativised both against other stories and other ways of writing. Writing, then, does not hold up a mirror to the world, but rather any instance of writing is a way of "adhocing through the complexities of an ever shifting sea of meaning and action" (Gergen, 1992: 223). The employment of Rorty's vocabulary to writing organisation is one where new writing is always possible and pursued, but is done without recourse to the goal of producing a final version of the final vocabulary. Such writing can only ever attempt to allude to its own instability by contrasting perspectives, 'voices' and genres in a way that acknowledges and possibly even foregrounds the irony. This then characterises the writer as being informed by what Gergen calls a sense of 'lucid humility' where

[t]he view of knowledge-making as a transcendent pursuit, removed from the trivial enthrallments of daily life, pristinely rational, and transparently virtuous, becomes so much puffery. We should view the bodies of language we call knowledge in a lighter vein - as ways of putting things, some pretty and others petty - but in no sense calling for ultimate commitments, condemnations or profound consequences. We should rather be more playful in our sayings. (Gergen, 1992: 215)

Such writing is a way of producing a 'writerly' text (Barthes, 1974). This concept is developed through Barthes' distinction between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts. The readerly text is one that limits the number of oppositions that it incorporates by purporting to be an unproblematic transcription of reality. The focus of the readerly text is not on itself (i.e. a text) but rather on what the text purports to signify; it is a text which conceals its textuality through dominant and taken for granted genres and modes of representation. The readerly text achieves closure and positions the reader as a passive consumer of its meaning. In opposition, Barthes proposes the notion of the writerly text; a text which foregrounds its nature as a textual and cultural product. Such a text

*making a statement – in this way he's tied to the trace of social science where you have to pretend that you are 'right' (the dialogic implication being, of course, that others are wrong).*

*So ... he doesn't, for example, acknowledge that I exist. He makes no direct reference to me at all, he refuses to write me in. But still, I do think he knows that I'm here. I can tell by the way that he writes. He might be self-righteous, even pompous but I think his heart's in the right place, he's just afraid to let go. He and I are real people – we inhabit the same body, it's just that at different times and different places we speak with different voices and interact with different other people. But writing sometimes seems to me to be more solitary than it is. Like I said before I think that it's all about others – writing for others, using words that have already been used by others, and trying to present yourself to those others. The question, I guess, is which of those others get some acknowledgment and whether they're allowed to have a life of their own or need to always be subsumed into the narrative of a single I. I don't think they need to – for me it's just about figuring out ways to do this.*

*He can't do it alone. In my more positive moments, I think of myself as having lost the naïveté that still rings through his writing. A naïveté that lacks self-consciousness, lacks an awareness that whatever one*



highlights its incorporation of voices and generic conventions rather than attempting to keep its production transparent. It is a text that is heterogenous and contradictory and denies the possibility of closure. To produce a writerly text is to produce a text that seeks to interrupt itself and to reveal the way that it constructs a plausible reality – to demystify the textual construction of organisation. Importantly such a text does not provide the reader with a prepackaged meaning, but rather encourages readers to participate in the production of that meaning.

### Conclusion

The irony of the heteroglossic organisation is one that accepts that organisational knowledge can be expressed in different voices, through different stories and using different generic conventions, but also realises that expanding the multiplicity of representations of knowledge does not mean that we can say we know more about what is written. On the contrary, multiple representations demonstrate that none of them can be seen as correct, and that each one is relativised in the endlessly heteroglossic possibilities of an organisation. Rather than assuming that through writing we come to know more, the notion of the heteroglossic organisation suggests an unsurity of what it means to 'know' anything about organisational life as portrayed in language. Textual representations are not mirrors of the reality of the organisation, but rather they are contesting claims about the organisation such that the writing of research moves from attempts to represent or persuade to a reflection on the relationship between texts (Fox, 1995). These relationships need not be seen as exclusive or incommensurable, but rather, within them any representation produces an effect that is capable of being relativised against some other representation. This approach accepts the plurality of different perspectives and representational possibilities where organisational realities are many things at the same time and where theory sensitises people to those multiple realities (Walter-Busch, 1995). Theory and knowledge then fabricate the social that they once claimed to describe or explain (Fox, 1995).

*says or writes, it can always be said or written about differently. He proposes that multiple languages and genres should be used, but it's me who does it. I try to contest, to subvert to make things less simple and conclusive. In one way of thinking, all language is dialogised – the words and the genres that both of us use have all been used before – we've just borrowed them for our own purposes. We learnt these different uses of language from interacting with other people, from reading other people's writing, from speaking and listening. Without those other people, neither his text nor mine could have been possible. Why not acknowledge that otherness? My strategy is to try to be different, reflexive and less conclusive.*

*As the major text on the left is coming to an end I also must sign off and end my 'self'-ish musings. I'll finish, then, by telling you a little of the history of this paper and how it came to exist in its current format. In its original version, I didn't exist – it was just him. He was much bigger then but had to be trimmed down to make space for me. In his former state, he received criticism – he'd presented himself at a seminar, he'd been read by his students, and he'd received written commentary by journal reviewers (and been rejected) – a consistent line of criticism from all corners was his lack of reflexivity. It seems that there is a dominant logic that suggests*

Thinking of an organisation as heteroglossic is about eschewing the desire to pronounce one's writing as being the master voice that is able to speak authoritatively about what is going on. Instead, "all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualising the world in words, specific world views, each characterised by its own objects, meanings and values" (Bakhtin, 1981: 291). To write then is to find one's voice whilst recognising the voice of others; to tell stories rather than to write *the* story and to recognise the reflexive and ironic interplay between those stories. "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's [or writer's] intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others" (Bakhtin, 1981: 294). Writing cannot close off meaning, the final story can never be told, nevertheless "no writer who began in a rather lonely struggle against the power of language could or can avoid being coopted by it" (Barthes, 1977/1993: 467) – to write, even if acknowledging multiplicity will always close off alternatives, its character is such that it inevitably reduces.

Heteroglossia does not imply that writing somehow liberates from power, but rather points to an awareness and a sensitivity to the effects of writing and the power relations that produce those effects. Such awareness can lead to an ironic humility of one's own position and self construction in the interplay of organisational texts. The challenge this presents to writing relates how to recognise multiplicity whilst still being able to write and find one's voice in and through it. It is worth noting, however, that the recognition of this multiplicity does not necessarily imply naïve relativism – producing or recognising a plurality of stories and genres is not to say that all are in some way equal in their validity as representations of independent 'points of view'. On the contrary, the potential value of such multiplicity is precisely to draw attention to the fact that the stories and genres are different and *not* equal and that their claims to validity or truth are inextricably related to their modes of representation. This difference is such that dialogised heteroglossia renders monologue untenable and in so doing might

*that to propose a writing that is writerly and ironic must itself be done in a reflexive and writerly way – the text must be consistent in form with its own argument. In order to respond to this critique, the 'I' that is now writing was created – an I that is overtly reflexive.*

*What concerns me, however, is that although now the reflexivity is more overt, some of the irony is gone. In the previous version of the paper, by being written in an authoritative style, whilst arguing for non-authoritative writing, a gap was created in the text. This was an ironic gap where the 'I' that wrote did not heed the advice of his own writing. The effect this seemed to have on the people who read the text was an immediate desire to have this gap filled – but in its own way this gap added a writerly dimension to the text – it begged the reader to ask why the text was written in such a contradictory way. Although overtly the text was authoritative, there was a built in irony – an open offer to the reader to question and problematise the text's authority. The response to this gap, however, came in the format of a request for the gap to be filled by the 'author' of the text; indeed, to be filled in or for the text to be abandoned. Consistency was demanded, and I, I succumbed. This is why 'I' was created, to remove the irony and the inconsistency. Although I speak from a position of reflexivity, I am complicit in the authoritative staging of this text*

work to subvert monologue through multi-centred questioning and critique. This is not to replace one monologue with another, but rather to subvert the dominance of monologue itself. The implication is that monologue does not necessarily guarantee power and that it is pluralism, in the guise of heteroglossia, that can offer opportunities for subversion and resistance.

*and perhaps by having been called into existence, there is a reflexivity, which, while questioning textual authority, also reinforces it by trying to answer too many questions.*

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