Talking of talk … Does it matter?

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to put forward the argument that the interpretation of communication (rather than the form or content of communication per se) is important as it has real consequences within inter-organisational relationships (IORs) and to explore the veracity of this argument through empirical data.

A brief review of communication research in IORs

Interest in communication within IORs is substantial and has a considerable heritage. From a brief review of works in the area we note how, despite the diversity of contexts, theoretic perspectives and methodologies that have been employed in the study of inter-organisational communication, a common focus dominates extant work. That focus is upon actual communication so that researchers have sought to understand, from a more-or-less realist perspective, what communications 'really' occur between organisations, how these may be classified and what consequences ensue from different forms or styles of communication (e.g. Olkkonen et al, 2000). For a more extensive discussion of communication in the context of marketing relationships, the reader is referred to Varey (2002).

For our purposes, it is noteworthy that in former times, when issues of power and conflict dominated academic approaches towards relationships, many studies sought to understand how communications influenced perceptions of power and contributed towards tension between organizations. More recently, as the key phenomena that have come to dominate approaches towards business relationships are the more cooperative concepts such as trust and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), interest in communication has been both re-shaped and intensified. At the most general level a picture emerges of trustful and committed relationships that are necessarily supported by 'good' communication.

Several typologies have been applied to communication, with an underlying aim to differentiate between different communication patterns or styles and in particular to be able to identify that which constitutes 'good' communication. Influence strategies (for example, promises, threats, exchange of information) have been identified that draw upon specific power bases. As Gaski and Nevin (1985) argue, greater influence is achieved through the exercise of power bases (via communication strategies) than merely through their existence. Indeed, a strategic managerialist perspective has tended to dominate the IOR literature, with a presumption that relationships are 'things' that can be 'managed' and communication and influence are utilised in "all relationship management tasks" (Ford 2002, p112). According to Ford, a plethora of such tasks exist including: persuading customers; discussing relationship investments and adaptations; showing commitment and building trust; exercising power and managing dependence.

The literature provides classificatory schemas used separately or in combination to describe the communications that take place between organisations and form part of an analysis of IORs. These typologies include: at the most basic level, direct communication and action (e.g. Morgan, 2000; Weitz and Jap, 1995); the arguably more subtle distinctions made between power/conflict and trust/commitment-based communication (e.g. Gaski and Nevin 1985; Ford, 2002); managed/planned and unplanned communication (e.g. Mohr and Nevin, 1990; Anderson and Narus, 1999); and most recently, monologic and dialogic communication (e.g. Ballantyne, 2004; Gronroos, 2004). Despite the diversity and wealth of ideas that have been generated, work to date has a common focus which is upon the communication that *actually* takes place in such contexts. This realist concern has been addressed with appropriate methodologies that include survey methods, observational techniques and contextual case studies. In contrast, our interest in communication differs from previous work by being grounded in interpretivist rather than realist concerns. We introduce our social constructionist stance as a prelude to exploring the construction of inter-organisational communication in interview accounts of IORs.

A social constructionist perspective

The worldview embraced in the current study is that of social constructionism. This view emphasises the way in which the social world is continually reinvented (produced) by individuals, rather than as something which simply confronts them. Under a constructionist paradigm, 'realities' are though to be apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, although elements are often shared across individual social actors. Constructions are not more or less 'true', in any absolute sense, but simply more or less informed and/or sophisticated. Furthermore, constructions are

legitimately scrutinised and researched since it is through these constructions that the world is experienced and, therefore, they form the basis from which actions derive (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1985).

Thus we focus on the ways that people make sense of the world especially through sharing their experiences with others via the medium of language. Social constructionism is anti-essentialist. It assumes that what we take to be self-evident categories (e.g. self, organisation) are actually the product of complicated discursive practices. In this view, the apparent 'orderly structure' of the social world no longer becomes available as a topic in its own right (that is, something to be described and explained) but instead becomes an accomplishment of the accounting practices through and by which it is described and explained. This study chooses to bring such accounting practices under investigation as phenomena in their own right without presupposing the independence of the domain made observable via their use. The paper looks at how members of organisations use the idea and language of communication in finding and describing the more or less orderly character of those inter-organisational settings in which they act.

If the actions and atmosphere of IORs may in part be constructed by individual actors (Hakansson, 1982), then a discursive approach to studying (accounts of) these interactions has much to offer. Through an analysis of interviews with boundary spanners in a series of supply chain contexts, we ask if linguistic devices (and specifically, in this paper, those devices that frame communications in particular ways) are being used to establish supply chain 'facts' and to appeal to norms of network legitimacy. We consider the implications for B2B relationships within these contexts of the situated use of certain interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) or Discourses (Gee, 1996). These repertoires provide people with resources (broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figure of speech) that they can use to construct versions of reality. Our reading of (spoken) texts originates in discourse analysis and also benefits from a systemic-functional view of language (Halliday, 1985), orientated towards the study of the relationship between the texture of texts and their social contexts. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p61) explain: "What is at issue may be either discourse as part of the activity, or discourse in the reflexive construction of the practice, or both…". The bulk of this paper involves the second of these issues, i.e. an analysis of participants' reflexive discursive constructions of discursive activities/practices, discursive activities to which those participants appear to attach considerable importance.

The contexts and texts of the study

The focus of the research was upon the discursive construction of IORs and was pursued through interviews (circa one hour in length) with managers who had an involvement in such relationships. These included marketing managers working for a variety of manufacturing organisations based in the Midlands region of the UK. The firms were embedded in what might broadly be described as (and indeed, were described as such by participants) supply networks for agricultural (animal feed), textile-related and automotive products. What we have termed the demographic situation of each participating manager is summarised in Table One below.
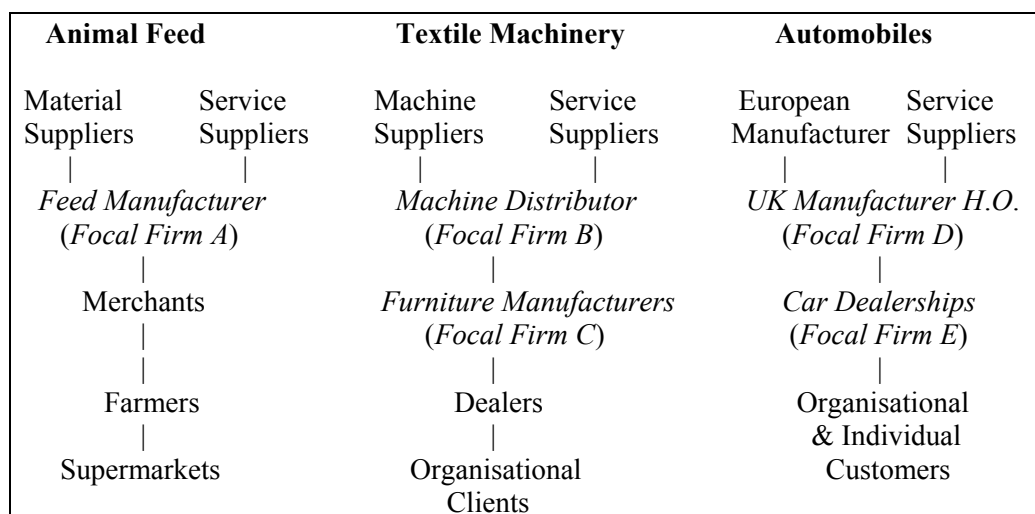
Table One – Demographic Situations of Participants

Participant	Focal Firm	Sector	Level of Chain	Participant's

	(see Figure One)		Integration	Main Role(s)
Managing Director	Manufacturer (A)	Animal Feeds	Independent	CEO, & buyer (services/goods)
Marketing Manager	Manufacturer (A)	Animal Feeds	Independent	Marketing to merchants & farmers
Area Sales Manager	Manufacturer (A)	Animal Feeds	Independent	Sales to merchants & farmers
Managing Director	Distributor (B)	Textile Machinery	Independent	CEO, & buyer (services/goods)
Sales Executive	Distributor (B)	Textile Machinery	Independent	Sales to manufacturers
Marketing Director	Manufacturer (C)	Textiles/Furniture	Independent	Marketing to dealers, & buyer (services/goods)
Marketing Assistant	Manufacturer (D)	Automobile	Vertically Integrated	Marketing to dealers, & buyer (services)
District Sales Manager	Manufacturer (D)	Automobile	Vertically Integrated	Sales, generated via dealerships
Dealership Marketing Manager	Dealer (E)	Automobile	Vertically Integrated	Marketing to organisations & consumers

The operating contexts faced by the focal firms represented by our participants comprise three partial networks, as shown in Figure One. This figure places the participant organisations (italicised) within the various (and broad ranging) supplier and customer relationships which are the subject of the texts we draw on in this paper.

Figure One – Partial Networks of Organisations

Animal Feed		**Textile Machinery**		**Automobiles**	
Material Suppliers	Service Suppliers	Machine Suppliers	Service Suppliers	European Manufacturer	Service Suppliers
Feed Manufacturer (*Focal Firm A*)		*Machine Distributor* (*Focal Firm B*)		*UK Manufacturer H.O.* (*Focal Firm D*)	
Merchants		*Furniture Manufacturers* (*Focal Firm C*)		*Car Dealerships* (*Focal Firm E*)	
Farmers		Dealers		Organisational & Individual Customers	
Supermarkets		Organisational Clients			

Our analysis could be criticised on the grounds that it effectively installs these demographic situations and supply chain trading contexts as objective social realities which different discursive practices then more or less reflect. However, we would counter that a common factor underpinning the studies was a belief in social constructionism and thus we adopted an approach to the interviews that was

conversational in style. In this way the researcher-manager interactions developed according to the issues and, crucially, the language of the participants themselves.

Discursive approaches to analysis

Although over thirty different IOR-related interpretive repertoires have been identified in ongoing studies (e.g. Ellis and Conway, 2003), our sole interest in this paper is upon the representation of communication. We therefore draw our data from across the sections of managerial discourse within our interviews that concerned the theme of inter-organisational communication. Analysis commenced with the identification of talk about communication and progressed through the categorisation and sub-categorisation of such talk. This began with our observation that the broad repertoire (or Discourse) of 'communication' was widespread, and often seemed to be evoked totemically as a tool (or resource) that could 'produce' trust (or at least compliance) between parties. Communication is thus itself a cultural category (Katriel and Phillipsen, 1981), as in "What we need is some/more/better communication".

An early reading of our data reveals that communicative incidents are discursively constructed in many diverse ways. We use 'communicative incident' to include any incident occurring in interview talk where we can assume, at the least, the potential for an exchange of "hellos". Hence we can see, for example, all references to 'visiting' (presence), 'seeing' (visual contact), 'talking to' (monologue) or 'with' (dialogue) someone and all re-enactments of conversations (rhepisodic speech) as reports of a communicative incident where something, we must assume, was said by both parties. Nevertheless these are framed as different events with diverse happenings. They construct situations that differ in terms of who acts and what they do.

Without attempting to relate managers' statements to the (alleged) incidents themselves, we propose that differences in talk about talk are important *per se* since this is an interpretive and constructive act through which identities, structures and relationships are produced. Our analysis commences therefore with the initial classification of 'discursive repertoires' or, ways of talking about talk and communication, and is led by the questioning of just what is happening discursively within each interpretive repertoire?

Interpretations of managers' discourse – repertoires of communicative agency

In the section that follows, we analyse several communication-based repertoires in turn. These repertoires establish a broad hierarchy of agency and are: presence, visual contact, monologue, dialogue, rhepisodic speech and words versus actions. For each repertoire, our analysis attempts to make sense of its situated use using a number of approaches. First we examine any demographic patterns of use that may vary by participant and supply chain context (based on Table One and Figure One). We then consider how the use of the repertoire occurs in relation to other interpretive repertoires. We move on to discuss the inter-organisational context(s) being constructed in the discourse, i.e. how these contexts are evoked linguistically by participants as opposed to being imposed by us, the researchers (e.g. depending on the particular IOR being described, speakers may cast their own – focal – firm as the supplier or as the customer). Furthermore we offer interpretations of the relative power relations constructed by the discursive positioning (Davies and Harre, 1990) and identities of the parties to the communication being described.

Excerpts of discourse will be provided throughout our discussion, with participants and sources of text excerpts (Ex) and stanzas (St) indicated. In each excerpt, the most relevant specific textual elements will be underlined.

a. Presence

This repertoire occurs in the discourse of all participants. It seems to reveal a perceived need, in a trading regime that is constructed by the hegemonic Discourse of 'the market', for individual actors to 'be there' in this thing called 'the market' in order to make exchanges happen.

The presence repertoire is proportionately more common in the talk of managers representing the textile machinery case context. A possible explanation for this may be the nature of the products being exchanged (they are technically complex and of high unit value) as well as the larger variety of customer sectors and organisations (compared to the automobile and animal feed contexts) with which the focal firm (Firm B in Figure One) deals. Figure One does not capture the full range of potential customer firms which include almost any manufacturer – including furniture - that may utilise textiles. This complexity could reinforce an even greater need than normal for 'being there'.

The repertoire is embedded in a further repertoire, that of boundaries. This latter repertoire is evoked in linguistic constructions such as here/there, in/out and being 'on site'. For example:

> "I believe that customer contact is absolutely vital. In fact, my regret is that I'm not actually getting onto farms the way that I should be, if I'm brutally honest." (MD, animal feeds, Ex 9 St 2)

The presence repertoire occurs in very similar proportions to the visual contact repertoire (see below), but instances of constructions of the self or others as sole agents within the communicative act are much higher within the former. This suggests that the speaker is 'here' and any other in a relationship is 'out there' as far as participants are concerned. Thus, prior to any talk, individuals may act often simply by crossing boundaries in order to 'be there', but not necessarily *inter*-act as much as might be implied by making visual or verbal contact with the other.

Although a number of firm-supplier relationships are discussed, the majority of inter-organisational contexts described by managers are those of firm-customer relations:

> "After the enquiry we do what we call a site survey visit. Um, and the idea of that is, our technical sales exec will go on site and obviously look, offering to look at the customer's application." (MD, textile machinery, Ex 5 St 1)

The locus of power within these relationships is typically constructed as lying with the customer, constructed below as "big players", who may occasionally do the visiting:

> "They [production staff] know who all the big players are cos I, I go out of my way to make sure that when we get the big customers here, they meet the production people." (Marketing Director, textile machinery, Ex 7 St 1)

Power does, however, sometimes lie with the speaker's organisation. This reflects the firm-supplier IORs noted earlier. Here, the speaker is purchasing the services of the printer in the extract below and can thus command his presence accordingly:

> "I got a guy in Nottingham, photographer just the other side of the M1, and printer in Loughborough. I could phone him now and he'd be here in an hour if I wanted him here" (Marketing Director, textile/furniture, Ex 17 St 3)

Power relations are more ambiguous with the quasi-vertically integrated supply chain context of the (franchised) automobile sector. Here we find, on the one hand, instances of power located with the car dealerships as ostensible 'customers' of manufacturer communication, i.e. customers with needs that the speaker is obliged to fulfil:

> "You're going to them [dealers] as the, as the customer, establishing their requirements and ensuring that you can deliver something to them." (District Sales Manager, automobiles, Ex 4 St 5)

On the other hand, we see that a degree of power is also held by the manufacturer. Managerial discourse often constructs this organisation as a particularly powerful 'supplier', as in this excerpt where the manufacturer's representative comes "to make sure" that certain activities are undertaken by the dealership staff:

> "Everything's measured by how many warranty hours we sell, erm, and they [district sales staff] come to make sure that the, the stable mechanics are working efficiently to get those hours sold." (Dealership Marketing Manager, automobiles, St 2 Ex 5)

With regard to identity construction, the 'going to', or visiting, is usually the action of the selling firm (or more accurately the speaker, who represents this firm), as shown in most of the excerpts quoted above. In addition, we do see others being positioned as actors crossing boundaries. These others are almost always the sales force of the focal firm, as in the following example:

> "Historically our field force would have been spending the majority of their time farm calling, on end users" (MD, animal feeds, Ex 4, St 2)

This repertoire of presence construct an essential need for an agentive self (or agentive others that 'belong' to the focal firm) that, in the majority of inter-organisational contexts described, is required to 'go to' the customer in order to make the relationship 'work':

> "You have to work with them and try and get them on your side, but to do that you have to spend a lot of time there". (Sales Executive, textile machinery, Ex 7, St 14)

b. Visual Contact
This repertoire again occurs in all the participants' discourse. It is relatively less common amongst speakers working in the more closely integrated automobile context. This observation is somewhat surprising since the contract between

manufacturer and dealer typically contains the right for the former to see/observe dealership practices. 'Seeing' may therefore be more important as a construct in other supply chain contexts since it is an accomplishment in reality as in discourse. Furthermore, if, in the automobile supply chain, dealers are not perceived as 'genuine' (independent) customers, then there may be less of a need to control/influence them through being 'seen': the rights legitimated by the contract are apparently sufficient.

To an extent, the visual contact repertoire is an extension of the presence repertoire, but it is also embedded in a broader repertoire of personal contact or interaction, a repertoire that suggests the need for some sort of social exchange, as much as economic and material, within IORs. Whilst visual contact need not imply a great depth of communicative interaction, the repertoire does suggest a subsequent need, once 'there' (i.e. having crossed some sort of boundary), to then 'see' another person from the other organisation (see excerpt below).

By far the largest proportion of contexts described by participants may be characterised as firm-customer relationships. For example:

> "Invariably you'd <u>be seeing</u>, I would go and <u>see</u> the end dealer and sales director in these businesses. Um, usually my area managers would go and <u>see</u> at that level as well". (Marketing Director, textile/furniture, Ex 13 St 10)

The vast majority of power loci found in managers' language use are constructed as being with the customer. This may reflect a concern amongst participants that unless customers 'see' them (or their staff), or perhaps 'see' evidence/outcomes of their actions, then they could easily forget them or their organisation:

> "Our role is as consultants or farmers' friends more than salesmen, but now we don't <u>see</u> them as much as we have less time. The farmers need to <u>see</u> us to buy the products."(Area Sales Manager, animal feeds, Ex 3 St 2)

This concern is heightened by a perception that 'the market' provides organisations with a considerable choice of supply, as in this case where the focal firm's relationships with potential suppliers are discussed by a particularly network-aware sales representative:

> "Everyone out there effectively has to <u>be looked at</u> cos, you never know, maybe you will make use of their technology." (Sales Executive, textile machinery, Ex 14, St 3)

In terms of identities, we find that it is mainly the (pro-active) speaker doing the 'seeing', with the other cast as the patient:

> "At the change of ownership [of the focal firm] I went and <u>saw</u> as many of the customers as I possibly could." (MD, animal feeds, Ex 9 St 1)

There is nevertheless some role reversal in the visual contacting described, wherein the other party to the communicative act is positioned as an active, as opposed to a passive actor. This does tend to reflect power loci, however, with the supplying firm/actor typically obliged to do the 'seeing'. For example:

> "Well John [management consultant] came to <u>see</u> us, and I'm very sceptical about consultants but I agreed with John" (MD, textile machinery, Ex 6 St 2)

Where further (third party) others are constructed, we find that these others are customers who need to have seen the sales force of the supplying firm in order to make a sale 'happen', as shown in this manufacturer/merchant/farmer chain:

> "I like to be out there making sales for the merchant. And they call me and tell me that themselves, that they've just had a farmer in who's mentioned that he's <u>seen</u> me the day before" (Area Sales Manager, animal feeds, Ex 8 St 2)

It is possible that seeing is constructed by managers as quite instrumental (e.g. 'seeing' the consultant or, as in two of the excerpts above, the animal feeds sales manager). In these scenarios, although seeing appears to carry no action, it may well be a repertoire associated with outcomes. This interpretation would position 'seeing' as more productive than the presence repertoire on our mooted continuum of communicative action. Further insight into the use of the visual contact repertoire may be gained from our discussion of the 'words vs. action' repertoire in sub-section g. ahead.

c. Monologue
Broadly speaking, this repertoire suggests 'talking to' an other as opposed to 'talking with'. In terms of other repertoires, the pattern of occurrence of this 'one-way' communication monologue repertoire may most usefully be compared that of the 'two-way' dialogue repertoire (see sub-section d. below).

Demographically, this repertoire occurs in the discourse of all participants. It is proportionately more common within the talk of managers in the automobile context, especially those who represent the manufacturer or 'head office'. This may well reflect the perceived status of dealers as quasi-customers who must be prepared to receive the (relatively monologic) 'instructions' of the manufacturer/supplier.

The great majority of contexts evoked by participants are firm-customer relationships. This IOR's high occurrence is partly due to the frequent discussion by managers of what we might term 'planned communications' within discourses that also correspond to the use of the monologue repertoire. Here, participants draw upon the marketing management Discourse as they refer to the so-called tools of the 'classic' promotional 'p' that are effectively used by marketers 'on' passive customers. For instance:

> "I think we've done four [corporate newsletters]. We find that it is one of the best methods of communicating with our customers (…) We probably <u>send three thousand of those out</u>." (MD, textile machinery, Ex 11 St 1)

Having said this, there does appear to be more discourse indicating supplier power than in the presence and visual contact repertoires. This occurs when suppliers are positioned as being allowed to 'tell' the customer firm certain things, or provide them with important information/knowledge. Although the following excerpt is from the automobile case, this use of the monologue repertoire does not only occur within the quasi-vertically integrated context, since here the (independent) supplier is 'upstream' from the manufacturer:

> "Eventually it [design document] went off to print with Colour Print [agency]. I then had a call from Colour Print to <u>tell</u> me that all the CD-ROMs that I'd supplied with the pictures on were all the completely wrong format." (Marketing Assistant, automobiles, Ex 3 St 3)

Power is generally constructed as being located with the customer firm, albeit positioned as the relatively passive receiver of these monologic communications. However, we do find tensions once again within the automobile case context. The two excerpts below indicate, first, the existence of a powerful 'transmitting' supplier/manufacturer, and second, that although a low level of power is thought to be held by the customer/dealer, they do at least have a 'voice':

> "You're a roving person, looking after eighteen dealers (…) so you're forever <u>banging on to them</u> on the phone" (District Sales Manager, automobiles, Ex 7 St 3)

> "What do you do to ensure that the [Car Brand] supply side doesn't let you down?" (Researcher)
> "There's nothing you can do, absolutely nothing, completely out of our hands. You can <u>shout, scream, rant and rave</u>, but there's nothing you can do" (Dealership Marketing Manager, automobile, Ex 3 St 3)

In each of the above excerpts, we see constructions of the speakers' frustration and an implication of a lack of response (at least in terms of action) from the other party. In these, monologue features as that which occurs when desired outcomes are not attained – discursively it is constructed as an ineffective form of communication.

The identity of the focal firm is constructed as an active one, both in terms of directing monologic communication (some of it planned) at customers, and in terms of dealing with suppliers (here again at the head office level):

> "It's a case of you co-ordinate all the different ad agencies to do what you want, so you don't really do much of the creative yourself (…) You <u>tell</u> everyone else to do it." (Marketing Assistant, automobiles, Ex 7 St 1)

Proactive customers (at least in terms of transmitting – typically unplanned - communication) of the focal firm are also constructed within the marketplace:

> "Why do they [customers] want another supplier coming along? (…) And they don't. And they'll <u>tell</u> you to your face, you know, 'I won't promote you'." (Marketing Director, textile/furniture, Ex 8 St 5)

We often find the co-occurrence of the monologue repertoire with a sub-category of planned communications. There is more talk of this latter category from managers at head office level than in the 'front line'. As we might expect, it is particularly prevalent within the managerialist Discourse of designated 'marketing' staff:

> "We've tended to concentrate on direct mail. It's much easier to measure and it's better <u>targeted</u>, but, er, we're certainly <u>planning</u> more advertising for this coming season in order to try and broaden our customer base." (Marketing Manager, animal feeds, Ex 1 St 5)

d. Dialogue

Again, this 'two-way' repertoire occurs in the discourse of all managers interviewed. Overall, the dialogue repertoire is almost as commonly occurring as the monologue repertoire (when the latter is shorn of all planned communication references). There are however, some important differences between the situated use of the two repertoires.

The dialogue repertoire is proportionately more prevalent than is the monologue repertoire in the talk of participants representing the manufacturer firm within the automobile context, and also of those representing the senior management of the animal feed manufacturer. As dialogue might be expected to be evoked more frequently by 'front line' or sales staff, i.e. those that interact more frequently with others on a day-to-day basis, this observation seems counter-intuitive. It may, however, reflect the assertion (or belief, however misguided) by senior and head office managers that dialogic communication is taking place between organisations when in fact it is merely monologic. This arguably may be detected in the discourse of the following supply chain "middle-man" (the speaker's own term), ultimately employed by the car manufacturer:

> "From a vehicle district sales manager's viewpoint, a good relationship is one whereby the dealer wants to <u>communicate with</u> you, and values <u>your input</u> as a positive thing." (District Sales Manager, automobiles, Ex 10 St 7)

The majority of IOR contexts where the dialogue repertoire is drawn upon to provide accounts are, once again, those of firm-customer relationships:

> "We do try and <u>share</u> our, our plans with them [merchants], get <u>feedback</u> from them as to what they think about it. Obviously they are the customer, the primary customer, and so any <u>feedback</u> we can get is vital to us, for sure." (Marketing Manager, animal feeds, Ex 2 St 4)

The higher proportion of firm-supplier contexts evoked here than for the monologue repertoire is probably indicative of the descriptions by managers of supply chain negotiations carried out by relatively powerful focal firms, this time themselves in the role of customer:

> "We've taken on some new partners [suppliers]. The premise is they're very willing to come over and be flexible <u>with</u> customers and totally design things <u>with</u> customers (…) If a standard solution doesn't work, there's no point in <u>talking about</u> it." (Sales Executive, textile machinery, Ex 9 St 6)

There is a relatively high proportion of discourse within the quasi-vertically integrated context that uses the dialogue repertoire. Dialogue is often constructed as taking place between manufacturer and dealers, with each party having apparently equal power in the relationship (e.g. see first excerpt in this sub-section). In line with this, within the same automobile context, manufacturer/supplier power seems to be portrayed as lower in the use of the dialogue repertoire than for discourse that uses the (instructional) monologue repertoire. These linguistic constructions suggests a dealer/customer that is deserving of the right to be engaged in dialogue:

> "What makes a good one [dealer]? Erm, <u>willingness to converse</u> actually. If something is, <u>if something you've done they don't think is right for them</u>, the ability to pick up the phone and say, 'Hi, your name's at the bottom of this. I think the real way this should have gone is, x, y, z'." (District Sales Manager, automobiles, Ex 10 St 4)

Several instances of mutual power relations are described in market contexts. A relatively low proportion of reported communication involving customer-based power for this repertoire seems to indicate that where speakers represent organisations that have been constructed as having expertise that customers need, dialogue is appropriate between these equally empowered actors:

> "I have a group of customers (…) who tend to rely on the advice I give, um, and they telephone me or <u>contact me</u> in some way to <u>seek advice</u>, er, and that is really the ultimate (…) in that they will not take any feed buying decisions before <u>speaking to us</u>." (Marketing Manager, animal feed, Ex 4 St 4)

This is also the case where the focal firm claims to value feedback from customers, as in the following excerpt, where merchants' roles as supply chain intermediaries appears to result in them being (begrudgingly?) afforded some respect:

> "That helps define our relationship with our merchants. By <u>discussing with</u> them our route to the market, that enables us to have a <u>dialogue</u>, which is probably better than them just thinking that they are the customers themselves" (MD, animal feeds, Ex 1 St 6)

As we would expect, managers' talk constructs others as adopting a far more active position within dialogic communication than with the use of the monologue repertoire, as here where both the speaker and the dealer do some 'saying':

> "<u>They</u> [dealers] want to be able to pick up the phone and <u>say</u>, 'Bill, I need to put a chair forward. This is the problem, blah, blah, blah. What do you recommend?' <u>I'm</u> the guy that has to <u>say</u>, 'It's this range, it's that model'." (Marketing Director, textile/furniture, Ex 13 St 2)

A dominant location of agency is thus less easily determined for the dialogue repertoire than for monologic communication. Here, as a manufacturer's representative describes meeting some car dealers, a high degree of mutuality in terms of active parties to a relationship is suggested by reference to the (presumably) open nature of the "heated debates":

> "I sort of sat down and said, 'I work on the [New Car Brand] launch team', you know, 'If there's any questions?' (…) And you know, <u>we had some quite heated debates</u> about [Previous Car Brand] and goodness knows what." (Marketing Assistant, automobiles, Ex 5 St 4)

Nevertheless, we should note that claims for dialogue must not be taken to presuppose consensus.

e. Rhepisodic speech

An analysis of the monologue and dialogue repertoires provides further subcategories of linguistic use. The first of these is that of rhepisodic (or reported) speech where the talk of one or the other (or both) parties in a relationship is enacted and allegedly quoted verbatim. These vivid constructions appear to be used to produce veracity, to stimulate the engagement of the interviewer, and also to denote the (psychological) engagement of the speaker with the communication.

Rhepisodic speech is used by all participants. It is particularly prevalent in the talk of managers in the textile machinery supply chain, one where relatively expensive and complex products are exchanged. This may indicate a context where much negotiation is perceived to be necessary over the trading of large capital items in a marketplace where customers have considerable choice.

Rhepisodic speech is also relatively common within the discourse of all boundary-spanning personnel, such as marketing and purchasing managers. As in this excerpt from the self-declared "middle man" in the automobile chain, the use of reported speech in the form of recounted conversations (and indeed thoughts) provides evidence of the speaker's skill in handling relationships (here over the promotion of van sales):

> "The dealer(…), he sees himself as the customer and says, 'Ah right, OK, it might well be a good idea. Convince me of why I should do it financially (…) How about going halves with me?' And as a company we're guilty of not supporting that because that wallet [van promotional budget] is nowhere the size it should be (…) You say to them, 'I want you to try new idea A and it'll cost you four hundred quid and I'll bung half of it', and they'll go, 'Ooh all right, he must believe it'." (District Sales Manager, automobiles, Ex 11 St 5)

When encountering frustrations in relationships, this recounting of (often quite elaborate) alleged conversations, sometimes interspersed with evaluative comments, also serves to illustrate the speaker's relative lack of power, and thus avoidance of any blame:

> "They [customers] are under so much pressure and it, it doesn't matter, you know, it's no good, 'How are you John, did you have a good game of golf?'. It's just like, 'I haven't got time for that'. It's like, 'How can I sell…?', you know, 'I make eighteen pence a [product]', that's what they sell 'em for you know, 'How can I make another half p on that?'." (MD, textile machinery, Ex 21 St 3)

Unsurprisingly, we find a very similar pattern of inter-firm contexts to that for the dialogue repertoire (see sub-section d.) being evoked by participants. Despite the relatively large proportion of rhepisodic speech cited as being concerned with financial matters, recounted interactions that point to a social element to inter-organisational relationships are also fairly common:

> "If everyone around it is excited about it [a product], then it suddenly becomes very interesting. Not just on the money side, but you wanna deal with customers who are always upbeat, 'How are you doing?', 'Oh. We're absolutely packed out, we're having a great time!', rather than people who are moaning at you all day, 'Isn't life tough'." (Sales Executive, textile machinery, Ex 11 St 8)

Negotiations are also described by managers without using reported speech, but this category of talk does seem to allow for the duality of IORs (i.e. social and economic exchange) to emerge without being explicitly stated.

The relative proportions of discourse drawing upon rhepisodic speech devoted to the construction of power loci are also very similar to those using the dialogue repertoire, although customer-based power seems slightly higher here, perhaps as speakers seek to provide persuasive reports of hassles created by powerful customers. For example, as in the following negotiation:

> "If [large customer organisation], and they said it to me four years ago, said, 'Well, I don't want a dealer involved', and you say, 'Well, we've got a dealer group and these are the people,' say, 'We're eighty strong, nationwide coverage, all the rest of it,' the guy says, 'Well, if you're giving them 4% that means you've got 4% to give away. I'll take that 4% off my buying price'."
> (Marketing Director, textile machinery, Ex 9 St 2)

In terms of positioning, we find fairly positive identities for both speaker and others being constructed, even if the former position in the excerpt below is arguably somewhat contrived:

> "You know, from time to time we have an idea that's completely inappropriate (…) And if the dealer uses communication well and says, 'Hang on, actually this isn't appropriate because of x, y and z. I'll show you an example of when I tried it previously,' you have to say, 'Thanks for teaching me something, I'll bear that in mind when I go to dealer B who's similar to you'." (District Sales Manager, automobile, Ex 10 St 9)

Others are represented as transmitters of rhepisodic speech more often than is the speaker, thus tending to support the construction of the self as a receiver of customers' comments (both constructive and destructive). For instance:

> "They [dealers] were basically saying that they don't think that the marketing department (…) really look properly at what's really going on, and they, one of them actually said, 'They should come and talk to us and we'll tell them what badge levels they should have'." (Marketing Assistant, automobiles, Ex 10 St 4)

Some uses of reported speech position the speaker (or the speaker's organisation), as well as the occasional supplier/consultant (in the second excerpt), as expert and thus probably more powerful within the relationship, as the following two excerpts illustrate:

> "There is a group of merchants that will seek advice on (…) how to handle certain situations. Maybe they have a customer sitting with them, much the same way we are. They could pick up the phone and say, '[Speaker's name] at [Feed Manufacturer], would you speak to this guy? He's wanting to do such and such. Would you point him in the right direction?'." (Marketing Manager, animal feeds, Ex 4 St 5)

"He [consultant] came and did a marketing audit to check us all out, and because I said, 'In our growth stages, I want to sort of do PR and advertise and make people aware,' and he said, 'Well, why?' And I said, 'Because I just do,' and he said, 'Well, how do you know you need to do that then?' I said, 'Well, I don't, I just felt like it' (smiles). He said, 'Well, why don't we just look at your business, do a SWOT analysis and see where we are?'." (MD, textile machinery, Ex 6 St 2)

f. Dismissive rhepisodic speech

A second subcategory of managerial talk is what might be described as a dismissive form of rhepisodic speech. Here, in contrast to the use of reported speech, speech is summarised through terms such as "blah, blah, blah" (or "x, y and z" as in some of the preceding quotes) in such a manner as to suggest a *dis*-engagement of the speaker from the alleged utterance.

The demographic pattern of use of this form of speech is naturally very close to that for rhepisodic speech (see previous sub-section), but does occur much less frequently overall. Nevertheless its evaluative rhetoric power makes this linguistic device worthy of some consideration. In this way, we may see how participants can position themselves as dismissive of either the actor or topic (or both) under discussion.

The vast majority of occurrences are when participants describe customer-firm contexts. These passages typically construct the customer as most the powerful (though not necessarily right, or knowledgeable) party within a relationship. As the following excerpts show, this construction takes place in both market and quasi-vertically integrated supply chain contexts:

"So you can go along to the dealer and say, 'Well, you know you buy that from them, that from them and that from them, when you could buy it all from us. And the service and the reliability and all the rest of it.' And these people, it makes life an awful lot easier for the to have one supplier." (Marketing Director, textile/furniture, Ex 6 St 4)

"(You get) people [dealers] who are literally like, 'Der, der, der, der, der (mimes eyes scanning a page), oh sorry, I'll take a phone call,' and won't read it [manufacturer suggestion] and literally will not get round to it." (District Sales Manager, automobiles, Ex 10 St 4)

The work being done by the participants' use of language in the above quotes is doubly interesting. The first of these excerpts positions the speaker as, first of all, dismissive of the competition (and their product offerings) and, second, dismissive of the elements of the classic service marketing Discourse. The second piece of discourse (via the simple repetition of "der") manages to construct the dealer as complacent, yet also seems to hint that the communication emanating from the manufacturer may actually not be worthy of detail repetition for the interviewer.

There are some claims for the existence of supplier power using rhepisodic dismissive speech, again in both market and quasi-vertically integrated supply chain contexts:

"Well invariably the dealer doesn't know. He might say, (…) 'Erm, they need twelve boardroom chairs'. So then you say, 'What style is the boardroom?', cos if it's oak clad then it's not gonna be a trendy modern chair. You know, 'Is it classic, conventional, <u>whatever</u>?'." (Marketing Director, textile/furniture, Ex 13 St 13)

"You [i.e. the speaker] said, 'Put <u>this, this, this and this</u> in place and you'll be okay'. Go back three weeks later and it wasn't in place and they [i.e. the dealer] weren't okay." (District Sales Manager, automobiles, Ex 9 St 6)

In the first of these excerpts, the speaker appears to position himself as quite casually/un-problematically expert in whatever style of product may be required, whilst the same time reinforcing the lack of expertise held by the dealer. In the second, the manager also tries to show his (powerful) expertise and the extent to which the dealer ("they") need his advice, advice that seems so obvious that it is not necessary to recount within the interview itself.

Overall, both the speaker and others are positioned as transmitters of dismissive rhepisodic speech in broadly equal proportions. An example of the former is given below:

"My manager set me the task of (…) to go and see what the competitors were doing (…) And so I asked them questions like, 'How many accessories do you sell, <u>blah, blah, blah</u>?', things like that." (Marketing Assistant, automobiles, Ex 9 St 2)

This last excerpt seems either to construct the speaker as 'above' the task she has been set, or perhaps more likely, to construct the competition as a set of others not worthy of a recounting which contains the full details.

g. Words versus actions
One last communication-related repertoire is found in the discourse of all but two participants. The identification of this repertoire serves as a useful balancing weight to the apparent overwhelming mass of discourse presented thus far suggesting that managers believe that communication really *is* 'the glue' that holds relationships together (Mohr and Nevin, 1990).

What we have termed the 'words vs. actions' repertoire appears to be closely linked to the visual contact (or 'seeing') repertoire. Here, managers use the words vs. actions repertoire in order to portray mere (often verbal) communication as inadequate, rather in the sense of 'actions speak louder than words'. The repertoire suggests the need for concrete evidence or corroborated support of promises made by organisations.

In terms of demographic use, the pattern of occurrence is fairly similar to that for the visual contact repertoire, bar a relatively low level of appearances in the discourse of participants representing organisational sales forces. We might posit that as 'front line' sales people already perform the (confirmitory) actions of visiting/seeing, they do not need to consider the words vs. actions debate as much as their colleagues further 'up' the management hierarchy.

The use of this repertoire seems particularly common in the textile machinery context, again perhaps because of the apparently greater variety of customers and

suppliers, plus the greater levels of risk in purchasing expensive equipment than is found in the other case contexts. The very limited use of the repertoire within the (low cost) animal feeds context would tend to support this observation.

The vast majority of communication contexts described by managers are firm-customer settings, which suggests a need perceived by speakers to 'show rather than tell' mistrustful or risk-averse customers:

> "If an automotive seating manufacturer walks into your place and sees that you're apparel orientated, but you say, 'But don't you worry, our machinery is for you,' he doesn't believe what you say. He just believes what he sees, right." (MD, textile machinery, Ex 13 St 1)

As we might expect in such IORs, the predominant locus of power is constructed as lying with the customer in the relationship, who may quite legitimately question the speaker's word. For example:

> "He's [potential customer] not satisfied with his demonstration, only because he's gotta see it in production. Also what I want him to be able to do (…) is to ask an existing customer what we're like. In other words, all this stuff I've told him, is it true? And they do, you know, 'Is their service as good as they say?'" (MD, textile machinery, Ex 8 St 7)

The focal firm is sometimes constructed as holding the power in a supplier-firm market context, as well as in the quasi-vertically integrated automobile chain, as the following two excerpts show. In both cases the organisation/speaker expects to 'see' verification of the other's word.

> "I'm actually an auditor for our quality thing (…) so you go out there and talk to the guys and ask them [suppliers] exactly what they've done so that you're measuring them against the standards that we say we operate with" (Administration Manager, animal feeds, Ex 7 St 7)

> "What doesn't make a good relationship is people [dealers] who brush things under the carpet. Say 'yes' but do 'no'." (District Sales Manager, automobiles, Ex 10 St 8)

In the use of the words vs. actions repertoire, the position of an agentive self is broadly twice as likely to be constructed as that of an active other. This suggests a speaker who wants to be seen as 'walking the talk'. For example:

> "We get our clients to come here and have a product presentation right, because how do you differentiate us if you sit in front of somebody and just sort of tell him how good your machine is?" (MD, textile machinery, Ex 3 St 4)

Frustrations over others' inconsistency is another common theme in the use of this repertoire in order to position some customer others as those whose alleged words do not match their actions:

"They [customers] can be <u>screaming</u> for years, but they come back and buy the same machine off people [competitors]. And all they do is <u>scream and bitch</u> about them while you're there and <u>then they go out and buy another one.</u>" (Sales Executive, textile machinery, Ex 15 St 4)

Conclusions

We set out to explore how diverse ways of talking about talk in interviews and with reference to IORs may construct IOR 'facts', and to consider how the diverse repertoires of communication are deployed in this. We should remind ourselves that this paper has taken a social constructionist perspective in analysing the discourse of marketing managers. It is important to avoid realist interpretations of the preceding analysis. The identities and positions constructed within the texts may not be 'true', but taken as expressions of sense-making by managers, they do (at least in part) create the world(s) into which our participants act. We maintain that talking about talk is a constructive act through which identities, structures and relationships are produced. As such, discourse analysis is of importance in deepening our understanding of inter-organisational relationships, especially at the level of the individual actor.

The repertoire with least implied action is that of *presence* – nevertheless its widespread usage suggests the importance that the notion of presence or of meeting has for those involved in 'managing' IORs. It is particularly used with respect to 'going to' the partner so that it perhaps incorporates ideas of effort and of putting oneself out. At the same time it maintains the idea of boundary. There are several associations with the use of this repertoire. The selling firm generally does the going possibly maintaining the idea that the seller should make the effort. Going there is also more frequently used in situations of product complexity as a necessary part of generating understanding. To talk of presence in interviews is therefore to discursively accomplish the portrayal of an active and good IOR manager, even where little detail is given about the outcomes of a visit.

To *see* the other implies a slightly higher level of contact. The seller is very often framed as the person who does the seeing. To this extent the repertoire of visual contact restores some power to the seller with the customer figuring only as the person who is seen. This provides some re-dress to the idea of going that may imply the seller is beholden to the purchaser. Going there appears to be associated more with established, relatively secure relationships: seeing is an important aspect of activity in competitive markets. Seeing may also be used in contexts where a favourable outcome is mentioned. The repertoire is associated with possible positive consequences. This repertoire is less used in the contractual dealership contact where seeing can be regarded as a form of surveillance that is established within the contract. For others, therefore, seeing may be, in itself, an accomplishment and means of gaining information. To use this repertoire discursively re-accomplishes this act and denotes an active and potentially effective means of management within competitive markets.

Greater agency may be implied by the repertoire of *monologue*. In one usage monologue denotes the planned communications that form part of the marketing management Discourse – to communicate to others and disseminate information is part of what the marketing manager does. With respect to unplanned communications monologue is used particularly in the contractual franchised relationship and may reflect the contractual power imbalance and the legal or assumed right for the manufacturer to dictate certain aspects of business practice. Monologue is more

consciously constructed in instances where a perceived failure of the other to hear or react to what is being said is the cause of frustration. Monologue therefore discursively acts in several ways – to position oneself as a marketing manager, to demonstrate power to tell the other what to do or to demonstrate an inability to tell the other what to do.

Dialogue emerges in the literature as underpinning effective IORs. This is either supported or reflected in our interviewees' talk. Dialogue occurs when interviewees talk of feedback and joint problem solving – it is held to exist within 'good' relationships where it may either be associated with consensus or discord.

Cutting across the repertoires of monologue and dialogue we found some instances of reported or enacted speech which we saw as conveying a great psychological involvement in the reported incident but also as a means of evidencing relationship skills in the interview. In effect the speaker is demonstrating 'how they are in their job' and generally showing their ease in communication to the interviewer. *Rhepisodic speech* shows them as capable in managing the social (chatting about golf), economic (negotiating prices) and structural (managing demands of strong customers) aspects of the relationship. The use of rhepisodic speech serves as a vivid reminder that customers and suppliers are unique and accomplishes the picture of one skilled in responding to this. However, some rhepisodic speech carries the implication of dismissal or of 'turning off' within the conversation. The turning off may be to the rhetoric of management or to the detail involved in their job context. The speaker is thereby separated from the job.

Additionally, our study shows scepticism in some circumstances towards the idea of communication. This serves as a reminder, were it needed, that communication has its limits and must resonate with actions.

From our analysis we believe that the diverse ways of talking about talk are more than mere haphazard selection of words to explain events and fill interview space. Repertoires are deployed in different ways to demonstrate the diverse aspects of the IOR management job so that, for example, going there and seeing are in themselves critical aspects of the job associated with the individual management of particular situations. The production of the monologue of planned communications is a further aspect that demonstrates participation in the marketing management Discourse. We may also see the marketing management Discourse emerging in the value each manager attributes to dialogue. Diverse ways of talking about talk therefore enable the interview accomplishment of the self as both a practical manager of business relationships, participating in the diversity of this role and being able to differentiate between the tasks they perform and also as a participant within the more formal Discourse of marketing management. We note also that diverse repertoires are rather systematically associated with different outcomes – seeing and dialogue being more effective than visiting or monologue. These perhaps support the ideas about communication put forward in the managerialist literature of IORs. Nevertheless, a large proportion of talking about talk does not portray joint participation.

Our study therefore suggests that the way IOR participants talk about talk does matter. Use of diverse repertoires in diverse contexts and with their different outcomes provide one means of understanding and portraying the complexity of relationships, of demonstrating that understanding and producing the self as a manager able to cope with and act appropriately with that diversity. In these ways the discursive production of communication plays a role in structuring the world of IORs and establishes some of the IOR 'facts' into which managers act.

Managerial Implications

Since our interest has been in the construction of talk occasions in discourse, we are reluctant to comment upon communication in IORs or contribute to any literature prescribing styles of communication. However, we feel that to have shown that there is some patterning to the ways in which communication is reported has implications for management. Firstly we make some comments at a general level before looking at how our insights may be applied at an individual level.

We note the high frequency with which what must be communicative incidents are constructed as times of 'being there' or 'seeing'. Communication, it seems, does not necessarily have to be highly directed or tied to some specific topic or outcome for it to be worthy of report as part of what the boundary spanner does. Any managerial directive or research that concentrates upon communication as something with an immediate outcome seems, therefore, to be overlooking a major and valued part of the boundary spanners' job.

Additionally, communication constructed as monologue rather than dialogue is associated with ineffectiveness and in some cases, frustration. However, the planned communications that would often be seen as the organisation's promotional work are invariably constructed as monologic. We can see here some tension between the organisation's planned efforts and the understanding of those in the field regarding what works. This underlines the need, in business marketing, to consider how centralised and sales force communications operate alongside each other to increase the belief or opportunity for centralised activity to become part of a perceived dialogue – which our participants invariably cast as 'good'.

From this study, based upon nine depth interviews with managers in different roles across several industries, we have been able to identify certain patternings in the use of particular discursive repertoires of communication. We relate these to aspects including type of market, structure of relationship, and perceptions of agency and efficacy. Hence we argue that the study of discursive repertoires offers some insights into the interpretive basis upon which actions are based. We have developed a framework that could be used (either by researchers or management) to pay closer attention to the talk of boundary spanners. This framework could be applied at an individual level, and alongside other techniques, to generate fuller understanding of the interpretative background against which individuals within, for example, the sales team act. Whilst we are unable to identify the ideal type, closer attention to talk about talk may permit the organisation to do one of two things. Either it may identify approaches discordant with what the organisation (or more accurately those senior managers representing the organisation) holds as an ideal. Alternatively, it may allow a deeper understanding of the differences amongst personnel and hence more thoughtfully allocate, for example, key account managers to situations and customers.

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