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Narrating organisational identity: Staff positions in a fast-growing Danish airport

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Organisational identity may be understood as the result of communication processes, e.g. in the form of narratives and stories, that continuously intertwine and compete for the right to define the organisation (Boje, 1995; Humle & Frandsen, 2017). This understanding forms the background of the article which analyses the narrative struggles in a local Danish airport whose collective identity was challenged in light of organisational changes that led to a large and dispersed organisation. Combining positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990, 1999) with close linguistic analysis, data from a focus group interview are analysed, showing that through stories and narratives, top-management and staff members construct several positions along a cline that make it possible to achieve consensus across organisational levels and divisions. Furthermore, the article argues for analysing participants' linguistic choices in detail to come closer to how participants do positioning work.

Keywords: change, organisational identity, positions, linguistic analysis, staff, top-management, narratives, stories

Introduction

In organisational research, a central concern is understanding the ways in which organisations may come to represent coherent entities despite the variety of people populating them. From a more recent perspective, this has been explained as a process of continuous negotiation between influences within and outside the organisation, in which language and communication play a decisive role (Humle & Frandsen, 2017; Kuhn, 2017). While language as a constitutive feature may take many forms, language as narrative has occupied a prominent place in organisational research in recent years, in part inspired by its ability to act as a vehicle for interpretation, the ordering of experience and managing change (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Of these, change forms the backdrop against which the article unfolds.

Organisational change is often understood as a well-planned and structured process, orchestrated by management and communicated as a step-by-step process (cf. Kotter, 1995). However, organisational changes are much more than that. They may be messy and small-scale without any clearly developed and articulated aim, they may emerge from below, they may be incremental, or they may be imposed from the outside as a result of changes in the environment. No matter the origin and shape of organisational change, one defining characteristic is, however, that they will temporarily challenge organisational cohesion, and hence, organisational identity (cf. Jacobsen, 2012; Kotter, 1995).

Narratives and stories are important instruments for both managing and making sense of change and constructing organisational identity. Hence, narratives can be used for entrenching organisational values and instigating collective action during change processes, but they may also be used for constructing interpretations that are inconsistent with centrally promulgated narratives, underscoring the messiness just mentioned (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). For the creation of a collective organisational identity, this may appear problematic. However, despite the apparent

irreconcilability of these positions, studies show that while potentially being disharmonious and non-consensual, the narrating of organisational identity may still result in the construction of an organised, but possibly fragmented and differentiated, whole (Brown, 2006). Understanding how this may take place requires insight into the key components of narratives in organisations and the collective identities they construct, both in theory and in practice (Rhodes & Brown, 2005).

While 'the linguistic turn' has been adopted by many organisational scholars today (for further details, see Section 2), most of the research focusing on the narrative construction of organisational identity takes a surface approach to analysing how these narratives and stories come into being. By surface approach, I mean that linguistic analysis tends to be at the more general level of identifying terms that may, for instance, signal the discursive domination of themes, characters and voices (Boje, 1995), leaving aside more detailed analysis of the linguistic categories and strategies that underpin and inform these concepts. By doing so, I would contend, important information is overlooked.

In light of these observations, the aim of the article will be twofold: To examine whether, during real-life organisational change, narratives and stories may challenge or support a collective organisational identity, *and* to assess the degree to which applied linguistic strategies make these narratives come to life and even become dominant.

The article will be highly empirical, analysing and discussing identity constructions in a Danish airport, which underwent organisational changes as the result of strong growth in activities and revenues, among other things, leading to a significant increase in staff numbers and a more widely dispersed organisation. The ambition of this work is to contribute new knowledge to the body of research that examines the actual, real-life processes of identity construction in organisations (see, for instance, Humle & Frandsen, 2017; Van De Mieroop & Schnurr, 2017).

To achieve this aim, the article is structured in the following way: Section 2 provides an overview of narrative research in organisations, followed by Section 3, which treats the method for

analysis, positioning theory. Here the relevance of studying linguistic categories for the realisation of stories is also touched upon. In Section 4, the case of the airport, is presented, along with details on the empirical data and their collection. This forms the basis of the analysis in Section 5 and the discussion in Section 6.[1] Altogether, the article illustrates the complex processes of identity construction in changing organisations.

Narrative research in organisations

Narrative research in organisations has been directed at five principal areas: sensemaking, communication, learning and change, politics and power, and identity and identification. The guiding principle of these areas of inquiry is the profound interest in human relations and experience in organisational contexts and the realisation that narratives may function as a means of making sense of this experience. However, in line with the identified areas, narratives are not only means of interpreting events and representing versions of reality, they also function as vehicles for ordering experience through discursive action, for managing change and constructing authoritative versions of "truth" that organisational members may identify with or distance themselves from (Rhodes & Brown, 2005).

The acknowledgement that narrative research has an important contribution to make to organisational theory is reflective of what is known as the linguistic or post-structuralist turn in organisation theory. In this perspective, researchers share an interest in work that recognises the plurality and polyphony of organisations as well as the constitutive role of discourse (Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Ashcraft, 2007). Thus, a shared point of reference is the vital role played by language

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[1] Change management will not be treated as a separate subject, as change merely forms the context against which the analysis is carried out. This means, it will be dealt with as part of the description of the case organisation in Section 4.

in constructing organisations, e.g. in the form of dialogues or conversations (Humphreys & Brown, 2002), discourse (Fairclough, 2003), or communication (Cooren et al., 2011; Cooren, 2015), to the extent that it may be said *to be* the organisation. In the former understanding, networks of conversations or dialogues constitute organisations by mobilising language through talk, listening and the construction of meaning (Rhodes, 2000). In the latter, a similar interpretation is represented by the Communication as Constitutive of Organisations (CCO) approach, according to which the organisation emerges as the result of 'ongoing and interconnected communication processes' (Kuhn, 2017, p. 19). A common feature is to see communicative practices as involving text, verbal messages and context, acknowledging that meaning is co-constructed and involves the interaction of many forces. From a dialogic point of view, this means that dialogues "contribute to ongoing processes of narrative construction and refinement" where meaning is continuously shared, negotiated and contested (Humphreys & Brown, 2002, p. 422). In other words, narratives are "subjective and inter-subjective accounts of experience" and the means through which experience is made meaningful and communicable (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 172).

First proposed by Boje (1995), the metaphor of Tamara-land illustrates the polyphonous, ambiguous and contextualised storytelling processes that take place in organisations. The original contribution of this work is the adding of the socio-material to the enactment of story work, which challenges the unilateral control of the narrative by stressing the simultaneous and dispersed storytelling processes that take place across the organisation in different rooms, corridors, floors and buildings (Boje, 1995; Lundholt & Boje, 2018). This means that, from a Tamara-land perspective, it becomes difficult to control organisational storytelling, as it is impossible for the individual to be present in all storytelling rooms and hence, trace and control the shifting meanings of stories in these different locations and contexts. However, the socio-material is not only made up of physical space and time, it also includes the power structures and social and cultural conventions that govern discursive practices (Boje, 2006; Brown, 2006).

This has consequences for the establishment of an authoritative narrative for organisational identity. Typically, senior management will work towards establishing a preferred organisation identity that organisational members will be expected to adhere to, not least to facilitate strategic communication (Scott & Lane, 2000). However, despite senior management's powerful status in the organisation, the dispersed nature of storytelling processes allows for the development of alternative or counter-narratives. Similarly, narrative identity work is not a straightforward linear process, but takes place on the basis of a number of intertwined influences, involving, for instance, different social identities, such as age, gender, race, department, and professional identities that organisational members carry with them and activate in organisational contexts as well as associated notions of right and wrong that may either be in sync with narratives of organisational image and identity or challenge and contradict them (Brown, 1997; Brown, 2006; Crane & Ruebottom, 2011). Altogether, from an organisational perspective, narratives reflect efforts towards establishing an organisational identity based on the intertwined relationship between individual and collective identity formations (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Humle & Frandsen, 2017). However, the stabilisation of meaning this represents is only temporary, as underneath the surface multiple narratives exist that are constantly in flux, but also coalesce through negotiation and dialogue to form shared storylines.

Coming to terms with the terms: Stories and narratives

So far, I have used the terms narrative and story interchangeably to illustrate dialogic sense- and meaning-making processes in organisations. However, in the literature, the concepts used to define these processes have been developed to reflect specific understandings of organisational storytelling. Thus, contemporary research has challenged the canonical or autobiographical model, where a story has a plotline with a beginning, middle and end, which often takes place in a past time

and place and which is designed for a specific audience (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Boje, 1995), complementing it with understandings that allow for even short, "unstructured" passages of discourse to be considered as stories, e.g. because they fulfil some but not all textual criteria or simply because the people who impart the information frame this as telling a story through the implicit or explicit defence and cherishing of values (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Lundholt & Boje, 2018).

Researchers have coined different terms that reflect the attention to non-canonical stories, the most prominent being those of "small story" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) and "living story" (Boje, 2001, 2008). Both share the view that narratives (or big stories, in Bamberg's terms) are neatly structured representations of the world and identities, employed for strategic purposes, whereas small or living stories are the spontaneous accounts that emerge between organisational members in various situations (Jørgensen & Boje, 2009). In the small-story perspective, focus is on how interlocutors use stories to create a sense of who they are, that is, how they identify themselves in daily interaction, whereas living stories are seen as people's accounts of how they relate to, experience and engage with other people. In continuation of this, we may talk of story work, which emphasizes the "ongoing and open-ended process of making sense of our experiences and construct different stories of self, others, the world and the organization, not as finished, consistent or well-structured narratives but as responsive narrative performances" (Humle & Frandsen, 2017). These definitions will form the background for studying story work in the airport interviews.

Positioning theory

To analyse the relation between narratives and stories of organisational identity, we may turn to positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990, 1999; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Bamberg, 1997) which

"attempts to make connections between macro-'discourses' and micro-levels of interaction" (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 43). Thus, a particular concern is the relation between what actors do, what they are allowed to do and what they are able to do, which also involves focus on what the individual believes he has the right and duty to do (Harré & Slocum, 2003). Therefore, positioning theorists consider it an essential goal to "highlight practices that inhibit certain groups of individuals from saying certain things or performing certain sorts of acts or actions in discursive practices" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019, p. 2).

Positions are defined as "features of the local moral landscape, [which] consists of practices" (Harré et al., 2009). Practices cover ways of speaking and interacting, from which we may extract a position that someone may occupy, that is, "the social status, moral or personal attributes, characteristics or abilities, and biological aspects" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019, p. 5). Besides being individual, positioning may also take place at the group level, e.g. as intergroup positioning where individuals position their group in relation to other groups. This is a relevant observation for the case in the article, which focuses on staff groups' positioning vis-à-vis other groups.

The search for connections between identity at the macro and micro level is carried out by examining speakers' engagement with the subject positions offered by authoritative (or master) narratives, that is, examining whether they adopt, resist or challenge these positions, which will also be the focus of my analyses. Positioning theorists will typically be concerned with what goes on between the speaker and audience (e.g. in an interview), but they also see a connection between subject positioning and social power relations, where powerful actors will exert pressure to make less powerful actors accept particular identities or positions, that is, make them take on certain duties. This does not mean, however, that they consider actors to be without agency. Instead, and along the lines of narrative research and critical discourse studies, they argue that actors may resist, negotiate, or refuse positions, that is, state certain rights, thus maintaining individual agency (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Deppermann, 2013).

The analytical framework of positioning theory consists of a triangle involving three mutually dependent elements, that is, positions, story lines[2], and act interpretations, which shape and determine one another in social episodes (Harré, 2012). Originally, the theory would consider speech acts as an important element of this triangle, but later contributions have suggested replacing this with communication acts, to signal that besides speech, paralinguistic elements and physical positions are increasingly seen as exerting influence on the way individuals position themselves (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). Along these lines, I suggest that focus is extended to include materialities (cf. Boje, 1995), as they are found to be salient for the choices speakers make when they construct identities through story lines.

It may be difficult to identify when and how positioning takes place in a story, and positioning theory only offers vague guidelines for how this may be done (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). However, being interested in how identity work may take place through narration, Bamberg (1997, p. 337) proposed three levels of analysis that may assist the researcher (Kayi-Aydar, 2019, p. 134):

1. How are characters positioned in relation to one another within the story?

   This is the level where the characters of the story are identified, including the central agent, the characters at the mercy of others and those who are "rewarded by luck, fate, or personal qualities"

2. How does the speaker or narrator position himself within the story?

   At this level, focus is on how the narrator presents himself and how he wants to be understood by others. A key element is how language is used to make claims about these matters.

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[2] In this article, I will use "story" to cover the above terms of "living story", "small story" and "story line". This implies seeing stories as spontaneous accounts emerging in interaction, as relational, open-ended and responsive. From positioning theory, we may add that stories may also exist prior to conversations, linking the past with the present and the future (Slocum & Van Langenhove, 2003, p. 225).

3. How does the speaker or narrator position himself in relation to the audience, dominant discourses, or master narratives?

   At this last level, the narrator positions his identity vis-á-vis dominant narratives and engages with his audience, that is, "he establishes himself as a particular kind of person" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 391).

Critiquing the theoretical and methodological assumptions of positioning theory, Bamberg's (1997) three levels form part of a more general argument for doing empirical studies to establish whether speakers' positions are, in fact, restricted by dominant narratives, or whether speakers can actively position themselves through the telling of stories. This claim also underlies Bamberg's small story perspective (see also the section on stories and narratives above), which focuses on interactional aspects as proposed by level 2. The underlying assumption is that interactional positioning is the primary reason why speakers will tell stories, providing them the possibility of addressing "situated discursive concerns" rather than answering to dominant discourses (Deppermann, 2013, p. 6). Thus, Bamberg claims that speakers are not just "semi-agentive" as proposed by the work of Harré and others, but are constructing positions agentively (Bamberg, 2011; Deppermann, 2013).

While these three levels provide a framework, the guiding principle of the analysis will be the stories as they unfold during the interviews. Thus, as analytical units the levels will be foregrounded when the stories present these as relevant to the analyst. In addition, positioning theory lacks a critical component, that is, attention to the linguistic categories that assist in the positioning of characters and speakers, cf. also Bamberg's second level. Therefore, by adding close linguistic analysis to the three levels, I may come closer to uncovering and understanding how speakers do positioning work. This point has also been considered by a number of other studies, which have discussed positioning work on the basis of such diverse concepts as membership categorization, footing, voice, stance and perspective. However, it appears that these studies are either unclear

and/or non-exhaustive as to the realisation of identity and positions (Deppermann, 2013). This means that in the following analyses, I will point to linguistic expressions and categories which are key to the positioning work that takes place, but without prior categorisation as the one suggested by previous studies. This allows for a process where the data speak to the researcher, offering access to key linguistic realisations of identity. This does not mean, however, that the analysis will be entirely void of theoretical concepts and considerations. Thus, I will be inspired by the format suggested by Benwell and Stokoe (2006) which, in part, draws on Halliday's work (1994), as well as more generally by the linguistic categories employed in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which has affinities to narrative studies. This means that I'll be taking my cue from Halliday's (1994) three metafunctions of language, which include, inter alia, transitivity (the relationship between participants, processes and circumstances in a clause) and modality. Furthermore, my work will be inspired by categories of a more generally linguistic background, which are typically employed when doing discourse analysis. These include, inter alia, evaluation, metaphor, and pronouns as important instances of identity work (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

The case of the airport

The case for analysis is a local Danish airport which, until 2020, had experienced unprecedented growth over the previous 10-15 years with passenger numbers continuously on the rise[3]. Part of this success was associated with the expansion from a small airport primarily flying domestic flights to a larger international airport flying both domestic and international flights. Growth is typically associated with change through life cycles, where age and size are defining elements (Jacobsen,

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[3] Following the Covid-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020, the airport experienced a serious decline in passenger numbers and activities, which led to a 40% reduction in staff in August 2020.

2012). In the airport, this meant a significant increase in staff numbers (from less than 100 to more than two hundred members) as well as the partial delegation of management and control to divisions, leaving the management of more strategic objectives in the hands of top management[4]. As a result, the airport continued to be an attractive place to work, even though the flat hierarchy, nurturance of personal relations, and organisational cohesion cherished by the charismatic managing director was difficult to uphold. Altogether, the airport occupied, and still occupies, a prominent place in the North Denmark corporate and organisational landscape.

The significant growth rates led to a "growth and success" narrative that was vigorously pursued in all of the airport's communication, be it targeted at external or internal groups. Thus, besides making the narrative an integral part of its market communication strategy, the airport communications department and top management incorporated the narrative into their strategic communication with employees, e.g. at general staff meetings held with monthly intervals, with the aim of creating a common organisational identity, and hence stronger commitment to the organisation (cf. Scott & Lane, 2000).

However, to some groups of staff, this narrative rang hollow. To them, the narrative of success had very little bearing in their work lives, but was reserved for other divisions, challenging their sense of belonging and identification with the organisation. There are a number of reasons why this is so, including aspects such as physical location, professional identities and place in the organisational hierarchy, including distance between top management and divisions (cf. Boje, 1995; De Fina, 2008). This will be unfolded in the analysis of stories and narratives below.

Data collection: The focus group interview

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[4] Top management includes the Chief Executive Officer, the Chief Financial Officer, the Chief Operating Officer, the Chief Communicative Officer, and the HR-manager, the Flight Safety Manager, the Head of Security, the Quality Manager, and the Head of Retail.

To investigate organisational belonging and identity construction among staff in the airport, we carried out eight focus groups interviews, one with each division, during the spring of 2016[5]. For these interviews, we invited members of staff only, to ensure space for the free and open exchange of feelings and experiences among peers.

For the uncovering and analysis of stories, the focus group offers a number of opportunities. Firstly, the focus group interview is characterised by slightly different roles than those normally associated with interviewing. Thus, the individual participant is not interviewed by the interviewer, but engages in interaction and discussions with the other participants, whereas the role of the interviewer becomes that of a moderator. The moderator facilitates the discussions through the introduction of subjects that he/she wants the group to discuss, which requires knowledge either of the project goals or the participants' point of view to be successful (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Second, the focus group interview is suitable for producing data about negotiations, consensus and the handling of conflicts (Barbour, 2007; Wibeck et al., 2007). Thus, through the exchanges in the focus group, the moderator may gain insight into the range of opinions or experiences that participants have, individually and/or between them, and what it is that leads to the forming of particular opinions. In order for participants to provide opinions, Puchta and Potter (1997) also stress the importance of moderators being able to ask what they call "elaborate questions" to elicit the answers they need. Elaborate questions are understood as questions that do not follow strict grammatical rules, but which consist of a number of strategies to guide the responses of the participants when the question is unfamiliar or to encourage participation by offering alternative items to the question. The idea is that by extending questioning beyond one short question, the focus group will both be focused and spontaneous as it allows the participants to respond to "one or

more question components" (Puchta & Potter, 1997, p. 333). At the same time, through listening to the talk of others in the interview, participants may be able to express feelings, motivations and attitudes on a topic, which they may have difficulty expressing under different circumstances. In this way, the focus group functions as a cue for the extraction of more information and the understanding of participants' complex motivations, which it is difficult to obtain with other qualitative data collection methods. Third, and last, the focus group provides a setup that may generate a friendly atmosphere, where participants may enjoy their interactions and, as a consequence, will be able to acknowledge the viewpoints of others despite possible tensions (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Overall, the focus group interview proved suitable for the investigation of identity constructions in the airport, creating an open and friendly atmosphere in which participants felt motivated to share feelings and experiences that would reflect the many components that go into constructing identity.

The interviews were carried out as part of a more extensive data collection process, which included collecting data on organisational structures as well as communication policies, processes and platforms. This meant mapping communication policies and strategies as they were described in formal documents, followed up with studies of communication practices. Thus, we carried out a survey among airport staff to study how communication processes and practices influenced information levels and daily work in the divisions, and how this shaped the identification with the organisation. At the same time, we participated as observers in meetings with top management, with top and division managers, and with top management and staff to understand how information and decisions from top-management meetings were selected and made available throughout the organisation. Of particular interest was the degree to which information was framed and narrated to maintain organisational cohesion and identity.

The selection of the interview for the analysis

For the purpose of this article, one focus group interview has been selected, which was carried out in the division of Airside. What characterises this division is that it is primarily staffed with skilled and unskilled workers whose main function is to ensure that all machinery and equipment are in working order in accordance with airport safety regulations and that aircraft are loaded and unloaded. Thus, the division carries out functions that are key to the smooth, secure and on-time operation of airport traffic and that are characterised by manual labour. Furthermore, the division is placed in a building separate from the main terminal building. Thus, it would appear that the division represents an organisational unit that is less easily convinced by the dominant narrative of success and the organisational identity it constructs than other divisions, due to, among other things, the professional profile of its staff and the physical location in the airport (cf. Boje, 1995).

As mentioned, only staff members were invited to participate in the interview. For practical reasons, this meant staff that was on duty on the day of the interview. In the case of Airside, this involved eight members of staff, of which six were full-time employees having it as their main occupation to service aircraft, one was servicing aircraft as well as working in the workshop, and one was a temporary worker servicing aircraft.

In the interview, stories were identified and selected for analysis following Frank (2012), who proposes that it is the stories that present themselves to the reader that must be analysed. For stories to unfold, Frank (2012) recommends firstly that the analyst enters into dialogue with people's stories by getting to know the field or the everyday circumstances in which they tell the stories. In our case, this meant learning about the organisation by collecting data through surveys and observations, as well as studying a great number of relevant documents (cf. Data collection). Secondly, the choice of stories should be guided by animating interest, which involves being clear about what is one's fundamental interest. For us as researchers, this involved asking the more general question of how organisational identity is constructed through discourse (in this case, as

narratives and stories). And thirdly, the analyst must establish what a story is. On the basis of these steps, Frank (2012) recommends that stories are selected for analysis on the basis of phronesis, that is, "the practical wisdom gained through analytic experience" (p. 43). This means to be able to hear which of the total number of stories need to be analysed, that is, selecting the stories that speak to the original research interest; to make a selection on the basis of value commitments (good or bad) in relation to interests; and to analyse the stories iteratively, including representing stories, revising story selection, and revising the writing, if required. As such the method is intuitive rather than systematic, and analysis becomes part of the writing process.

Analysis

The division of Airside is primarily in charge of receiving incoming planes and preparing them for take-off. This involves the loading and unloading of luggage, checking and fuelling the planes, helping passengers with special needs on board the plane, etc. In this respect, the division fulfils a vital function in observing flight schedules, and so, if an aircraft arrives behind schedule, they are compelled to work fast and efficiently in order to reduce the delay.

In the following, the first story takes its starting point in the discussion about internal communication and the way it unfolds between Airside and other divisions in the airport. Focus is on what is perceived as other divisions' lack of understanding of the constant pressure that employees in Airside experience and which prevents them from communicating appropriately[6],

Extract (1)

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[6] Excerpts used for analysis have been translated verbatim from Danish into English by the author. While this allows for the closest possible translation of the original wording and word order, it may also strike the reader as being occasionally unidiomatic.

Participant 1

1   I think many times then … then it is the lack of understanding of what the divisions are actually

2   doing that creates problems. If they get new members of staff over there, and they don't really

3   know what it is … how busy we are. And then they call us about all sorts of things and this ends

4   up with … well, perhaps they get a sulky answer because we're so direct. And then … these are

5   things that may create conflicts, where you think 'Come on, start thinking'.

In this initial recount, the participant tells us that problems exist in the communication between

other divisions and Airside. The central characters in the story (cf. Bamberg's (1997) first level) are

(new) staff members in other divisions, whose lack of sensitivity to the busy schedules in Airside

leads to problems. Thus, the most fundamental issue at stake here is what may be termed an "us" vs.

"them" dichotomy, or, in Bamberg's (2012) terms, sameness versus difference. In large

organisations, there will always be closer belonging to the section or division you work for, which

may not invite an "us" vs. "them" dichotomy in itself, but in this organisation the divide between

Airside and other divisions is not only a matter of belonging, but very much a physical barrier

expressed through adverbials of place, cf. l. 2 "If they get new members of staff *over there*". To the

participant, the physical separation of divisions (cf. The selection of interview for analysis) entails

that (new) staff are too far removed from the everyday working life of Airside to know how busy

they are, which results in them being "sulky" (l. 4), that is, unable to communicate in an appropriate

manner. In this account, the participant identifies closely with his division (cf. Bamberg's (1997)

second level), that is, he expresses a feeling of sameness, through the collective pronoun "we" and

adopts a strategy of difference or "othering" (Harré et al., 2009) to frame staff in other divisions as

excluded from his own. Normally, those who are excluded will be denied certain rights or duties;

however, here it is, interestingly, the participant's division which is denied the possibility of

responding appropriately to requests, which has to do with the way the argument is presented. Thus, the others ("they") constitute the subject of sentences which describe material processes (e.g. ll. 2 and 4 "they get" and l. 3 "they call"), effectively assigning them agency, and hence the role of actors (cf. Halliday 1994), whereas Airside staff are assigned the role of victims or undergoers, who, in turn, also become "less blameworthy" (Bamberg, 2012, p. 104). In addition, when material processes are transitive (as in l. 2 "they call us" and l. 4 "they get a sulky answer") and active, these processes have the potential of having a stronger material effect (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

A little later in the interview, the problem of others not knowing about the workday in Airside leads to an extension of the story by other participants, who provide details on the handling and loading of luggage,

Extract (2)

Participant 2

1   Well, we're actually extremely service minded out here, but it comes with a cost, that's all.

Participant 3

2   Well, this is also the case with communication … sometimes … it's non-existent, because if

3   luggage is suddenly coming in … We have an … agreement that it must be delivered outside

4   twenty minutes before the plane departs, e.g. luggage … and then we load our aircraft, which is

5   fine, but then suddenly luggage is arriving ten minutes later. They don't tell us anything in there

6   … Well, how do they expect us to do anything about it then? So, you could argue there ought to

7   be some guidelines for this, or something of the sort. Otherwise it doesn't matter. It's easy to

8   agree on a number, if nobody does anything about it, and it has no consequences.

This short story emphasizes the problem of one division not following procedures that have been agreed upon to ensure that work can be carried out under reasonable conditions. It forms part of the first story, but comes with an added layer of criticism, that is, the problems created for Airside are not only the result of lacking insight and communication but also due to the disregard of mutual agreements. This is illustrative of a general perception among Airside staff that other divisions fail to acknowledge that tasks become difficult to carry out if others do not observe agreements, cf. l. 5 "Well, how do they expect us to do anything about it then?". Thus, participant 3 aligns with his own division (cf. l. 5 "we" and "us") but distances himself from others by implying the existence of contradictory moral values, cf. Bamberg's (1997) levels 1 and 2.

The general impression among Airside employees is that theirs is the division where others can place problematic or unpleasant tasks to be solved, simply because the division is the last step in the process of receiving and sending off aircraft. As one of the participants puts it,

Extract (3)

Participant 2

1 But often it's difficult to see that it's the same company because many times it's all about …

2 Well, as far as I can see, it's just a matter of passing the buck. You know, they can get their

3 things in order and close [the case], and then we end up with the crap.

4 …

5 … because we're at the end of the line, that is, we're the last [persons] to handle the aircraft. So,

6 there's obviously a lot of pressure out here with us, but it's clear if you keep pushing the time,

7 then we have to run faster … yes.

The perception that mutual agreements are disregarded, and tasks are passed on to make work easier for staff in other divisions underlines the feeling of not being part of the same organisation, cf. l. 1 "But often it's difficult to see that it's the same company". Thus, a story evolves that details continuous problems between divisions, effectively maintaining an "us" vs. "them" construction (Harré et al., 2009). And this is not just recounted matter-of-factly but is described in negative metaphorical terms such as the others "passing the buck" (l. 2) and leaving Airside with "the crap" (l. 3), restricting their agency and referring responsibility to "the others" (Bamberg, 2012). At the same time, employees in Airside take pride in being service-minded (Extract 2, l. 1), which creates problems when the feeling is that other divisions show little respect. Thus, the combination of task overload and service-mindedness "comes with a cost", that is, it leads to stress. This story is, in other words, effectively positioning the participants, and in continuation of this, Airside in contrast to other divisions, and even the organisation as a whole (cf. l. 1. "it's difficult to see that it's the same company"), creating distance to the dominant narrative of success, cf. Bamberg (1997), level 3.

As the interview proceeds, another, but associated, story evolves, which focuses on the more general role of Airside in the organisation. It contributes to the understanding that it is the division others can count on to do the job that others cannot or will not do, no matter if it forms part of their formal job descriptions. Here, participants talk about the tasks they may be asked to carry out besides their main responsibilities of servicing incoming and outgoing aircraft,

Extract (4)

Participant 4

1   Well, we've always been the division … if there was a problem, we'd solve it. If there's a

2   problem in the airport after hours, then it's always us they call. We must go … there's a car that

3   won't start in the parking lot, there's something in PAX[7] … then it's always us they call. We

4   must solve problems.

5   ….

6   If there's a major problem out here, and no one can solve it … or if nobody knows quite what to

7   do, then they call us.

Participant 2

8   Because we're a kind of handymen.

Paradoxically, the division is called Airside, and yet its staff solves a great number of practical

problems on the ground that have nothing to do with this particular organisational area. This

appears, however, to be an important reason why they are a highly valued section in the airport and

why the participants come across as reasonably content, after all. The repeated reference to

instances in which they are called by other divisions to take care of problems (ll. 2, 3 and 7) is

testimony to this, and the repetition suggests that the participants find this an important part of their

identity and reason for being in the airport. As opposed to the story above, the participants and their

division now become the central characters, the problem solvers, effectively assuming agency as a

way to create an organisational identity, in which they are "strong, in control and self-determined"

(Bamberg, 2012, p. 104). This is done through the repeated use of the collective pronoun 'we' as

the subject of material processes, as in l. 1 "we'd solve it", l. 2 "we must go" and l. 4 "We must

solve problems" and relational processes, as in l. 8 "we're kind of handymen" (Halliday, 1994). The

importance of these processes is further underlined by the use of the modal verb "must", which

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[7] Passenger handling, e.g. check-in.

indicates that not only are Airside staff "doers", they also feel a strong obligation to be so (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

Thus, although continuously constructing their position in the airport as being at the end of the line, disconnected from the rest of the organisation and burdened with tasks, the participants also take pride in being able to do what no one else can, that is, it gives them the feeling of being indispensable to the functioning of core activities (cf. l. 8 "Because we're a kind of handymen"), creating a distinct *sameness* within the division and between participants. This appears to be closely connected to the main focus of the airport, that is, receiving and sending off passengers, and not least keeping these passengers happy. As one of the other participants puts it elsewhere in the interview, "And we're all here for the customers, so if they weren't here, we wouldn't be here either".

The above analysis suggests that communication between divisions is important for employees' identification with the organisation. Thus, other divisions lack of respect for agreements and ignorance of workloads and schedules combined with a communication behaviour that seriously undermines employees' control with their daily work life makes it difficult to identify with the larger organisation and with the narrative of success, in particular (cf. Bamberg's (1997) level 3). It gives rise to the construction of a "we", which is inclusive of employees in Airside, but leaves out employees in other parts of the organisation. This "we", however, is not a submissive we, but one that is proud to be of service and to take on the tasks that are difficult for others. Thus, participants legitimize their position, and hence their identity, in the organisation through a status of indispensability, professionality and privilege on the basis of doing what others cannot or will not do, that is, by being trustworthy and appropriate (cf. Pedersen, 2014) as well as by fulfilling vital functions. A primary impetus for this position appears to be passenger satisfaction – an objective which is shared across the airport and renders a more broadly inclusive "we".

However, this more inclusive "we" is not only challenged by miscommunication between divisions, but also by what is regarded as a mismatch between the continuously repeated narrative of success and 'reality' on the floor. This becomes apparent a little later in the interview when our talk becomes centred on the monthly meetings in which all staff meet with top management to get updates on organisational developments as well as talk about important new measures in the airport. Central characters in the following excerpt are Airside staff and top management, cf. Bamberg (1997), level 1. Participants 3 and 4 say,

Extract (5)

Participant 3

1   Well, also, then I just think that when, when we must attend these different courses and so on,

2   and we've heard about how fantastic everything is, and so on, and so on, that this has been the

3   best month in … 5000 years, and … well, then over here you tend to think that if everything is so

4   fantastic, then why can't it reach any further so we can make it work even better. But it's just …

5   everything is great and so on, and then we're told that we've had so and so much new gear and

6   so on, but all we've got is …

Participant 4

7   It was something we acquired twenty years ago.

Participant 3

8   *Yes, used, worn down gear we get from Østerbro [a local moving company] or Copenhagen*

9   *[airport]. So, yes, you just stand there with a bit of bad taste in your mouth, right, because*

10   *"what?" … they make us listen to how fantastic everything is …*

11   *...*

12   *I think, at least at the last meeting we attended up there, it was ... Then I had, when I left, a sense*

13   *of it almost being a little nauseating how great everything is ... and rosy. They ought to come*

14   *over here and jump into an aircraft to see how it works with our gear.*

The story that unfolds in the above passage once again points to communication as a dividing mechanism in the organisation. Top management repeatedly tells the story of continuous success and growth in the airport but appears ignorant of whether this is a narrative that resonates with division staff. For the participants, however, there appears to be a significant difference between what they think is described as a rosy picture of the situation (cf. l. 13) and what they experience in handling the aircraft. Thus, through the description of the meetings, the participants distance themselves from management. The difference in experience is so stark that it gives rise to metaphors which construct bodily reactions of discomfort, cf. l. 9 "bad taste in your mouth" and l. 13 "a little nauseating" in light of the "fantastic" and "great" situation (ll. 2, 4, 5, and 10) described by management. Metaphors are generally understood as deriving from our bodily and contextualised experience with the surrounding world, in which a transfer of meaning is typically made between a well-known physical domain to a more abstract domain. As such, metaphors are considered inconspicuous and yet powerful cognitive and linguistic mechanisms for constructing non-physical reality, especially when it comes to the expression of emotions (Kövecses, 2015; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In this case, the feeling of disgust that the top manager's presentations give rise to is expressed through the conceptual metaphor DISGUST IS BEING SICK, from which derives the expressions "bad taste" and "nauseating" (Kuczok, 2016). Thus, the proximity of the experience to unpleasant physical sensations requires little processing effort to be understood by others, with the meaning and evaluation remaining unquestioned.

The core of the issue and the possible reason why it evokes such strong feelings in the participants is connected to the story analysed further above (cf. Extracts 1 and 2), that is, the construction that staff in other places of the airport are ignorant of working conditions in Airside and therefore fail to communicate in appropriate and appreciative ways. In the present story, this situation becomes further exacerbated by the fact that it is top management who is unwilling to acknowledge a less rosy reality in the division than what appears from the story they tell. Thus, we are told that management insists on the success being felt in the division through the investment in new equipment (cf. l. 5 "then we're told that we've had so and so much new gear"), despite this being far from the experience in Airside (cf. l. 7 "It was something we acquired twenty years ago").

Discussion

The insistence on a success narrative may be interpreted as top management's strategy for "reducing identity plurality" (Humphreys & Brown, 2002, p. 423) in order to convince stakeholders, but the analysis indicates that this is no easy task if key components of the narrative do not reflect experiences in everyday working life. Thus, resistance is likely to be voiced resulting in the construction of alternative versions of reality (Brown, 2006), as the analysis also suggests. However, the question is whether alternative versions are powerful enough to challenge a culturally dominant narrative. Research (Boje, 1995; Brown, 2006; Humle & Frandsen, 2017; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Rhodes & Brown, 2005) suggests that while it is possible to voice dissent from narratives proposed by management, it requires coherence and legitimacy for this to be successful. Thus, analyses show that the most coherent and earliest articulated stories and narratives stand better chances of prevailing (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). From the interview, it appears that

management's narrative is the most coherent one, especially since it is the result of well-considered strategic efforts promoting the success of the organisation, and it is therefore likely that it will suppress alternative stories. Similarly, I suggested that Airside staff derive their legitimacy from being indispensable to the functioning of core activities in the airport, but it is hard to say whether this is enough to make a strong case for an alternative narrative and thus for a change in communication strategy towards the division. The reason for this may be that while constructing themselves as the outsiders, Airside staff also contribute to the emergence of "shared storylines and themes" (Brown, 2006, p. 734) when they buy into and contribute to the overall operating license of the organisation, that is, the servicing of passengers and customer satisfaction. This seriously hampers their possibility of making a case for change in narratives and communication.

The close study of linguistic categories and constructions used to position participants and characters adds interesting nuances to this interpretation. Thus, the first part of the analysis foregrounds the strategies participants use to construct Airside staff as "victims". The contrastive use of the personal pronouns "they" vs. "we/us" is a simple and obvious way of constructing differences between groups of staff, but in the interview, this difference is made starker through other linguistic strategies. These involve the emphasis on physical distance through relevant adverbials of place as well as the reference to processes with material effects, cf. Extract (1). This strategy is effective when the purpose is to underscore differences and the perceived power imbalance between divisions, legitimising what may otherwise be considered as inappropriate reactions and, at the same time, disclaiming any responsibility for these. This is supported by the use of metaphorical expressions that are so integrated into language and thought that they are hardly noticed and yet paint a coherent picture of Airside as the victims, cf. Extract (3).

Similar observations can be made when participants talk about their value to the organisation, that is, when they construct themselves as doers or agents. They continue to refer to processes with

material effects, but these are effects that are closely associated with their understanding of Airside as handymen, that is, oriented towards problem solving and obligation, expressed through deontic modality. This way, despite the previous constructions of undergoers (cf. Bamberg, 2012), participants' use of linguistic means allows them to obtain legitimacy in the interview and position themselves as indispensable to the organisation, cf. Extract (4).

Altogether, the positioning work that participants do during the interview creates a strong basis for voicing criticism of top management's dominant success narrative, challenging the common organisational identity that management seeks to instil in staff, cf. Extract (5). Thus, the constructions of victimhood on the one side, and indispensability on the other, combine with metaphorical expressions to represent a credible alternative.

It was noted above that an important prerequisite for a narrative to prevail is coherence and early articulation, in which case it was assumed that management's narrative would stand the best chance. However, the analysis and discussion of linguistic strategies shows that stories in the Airside interview are surprisingly consistent drawing on a coherent set of linguistic categories that allows participants to construct a strong position for themselves vis-á-vis other divisions (or characters in the stories). This is, in part, achieved through appropriate strategies of material processes, personal pronouns, adverbs, modality and metaphor, with the latter adding subtle and yet powerful evaluations to the stories.

This is supported by another observation, namely, the tendency to use verbs in the present tense as opposed to the simple past tense, typical of classical narratives. The use of the present tense signals that events and incidents are habitual or recurring, which makes the exact timing of the events seem irrelevant (Van De Mieroop, 2021). Instead, the use of the present tense suggests that events have taken place repeatedly in the past, but are also likely to occur again, if the circumstances provide an opportunity for this (Trinch, 2003). Thus, the habitual form may provide

the participants with the opportunity to show that their reactions and contrasting identity constructions are consistent and indeed reasonable (cf. Cheshire & Ziebland, 2005). This may support the argument above that participants are able to construct a strong position for themselves.

The above observations suggest that coherence is established at different levels, both on the macro level as narratives being told repeatedly across the organisation and within divisions, as well as on the micro level as repetition of linguistic strategies, creating intertextual links and consistent stories. Hence, it would be too easy to discard division stories as ineffective in challenging management's dominant narrative and in questioning the identities and positions it offers to members of staff.

Conclusion

The article set out to examine the construction of a joint organisational identity in organisations that undergo changes, exemplified by a local airport where growth resulted in a significantly larger and more dispersed organisation. As suggested by the analysis, the dispersed organisation allows for the construction of stories that may oppose the authoritative narrative, creating a separate divisional identity, on the one hand, and the construction of stories that will support the collective narrative and identity, on the other. However, backing theories in the field, the analysis also demonstrates that stories and narratives emerge, intertwine and compete for the right to define the organisation, and in doing so they construct several positions along a cline, making it possible to achieve consensus across organisational levels and divisions. Another takeaway of the analysis is the importance of doing close linguistic analysis of participants' stories. While it is possible to analyse positioning work in stories and narratives on a more general linguistic level, the closer analysis

reveals relevant nuances that will help the analyst establish on a more fine-grained level how identities are established and negotiated. Thus, if we want to understand the mechanisms that assist in making identity narratives and stories live in the organisation, it is recommended to pay attention to the elements on both a macro and micro level that help achieve this.

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