

The problem of extraneous text: Opposition to organizational change, dynamic & synoptic orientations

Brenton Faber
North Carolina State University
Department of English
Raleigh NC 27695
bdfaber@ncsu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an initial examination of discourses used to resist and destabilize change after change has been initiated within a social network. The study examines an email exchange among association members in which one member offered a proposal for changing the way members post email to their list-service. In the proposal, the writer employed one discourse of usability and claimed it to be the dominant (and only) form for the field. As that specific discourse began to stabilize, other actors entered the conversation to destabilize both the change and the conversation that enabled the possibility of change. The result of these exchanges was a reinforcement of the very forms the agent of change attempted to challenge. Examining the relative stability of each contribution to the email conversation, the study shows that opposition was enacted only once the change appeared to stabilize. The case describes one example of the competing discursive aggregations that constitute organizational networks and the forms enacted by discourses of change.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.6.1[Management of Computing and Information Systems]: Project and People Management – *strategic information systems planning*.

General Terms

Management, Documentation, Design, Theory

Keywords

Organizational communication, Managing change, resistance to change, discourse studies, dynamic, synoptic style

1. ORGANIZATIONS AS DYNAMIC NETWORKS

In general terms, modern organizations can be understood as the convergence of specific social and material networks. These networks are, alternatively, temporary and longer-term alliances that unite in order to achieve any number of financial, ethical, personal, or cultural objectives [9]. To put it more practically, organizations are not stagnant monolithic structures. Organizations are shifting and responsive aggregations of power, self (and group) interest, and utility [1]

A contributor to uneasy organizational networks, information management realizes and unites competing interests across the organization [2]. In addition to whatever technical challenge an information system presents, local actors simultaneously balance the efficacy of system-wide applications with the problem that these applications will be deployed in arenas of contention, resistance, and negotiation. As most IT professionals (and users) can attest, when resources can no longer keep aggregations together, the resulting tensions engender resistance and opposition across the organization.

Empirical studies of information systems in workplaces have shown writers and information designers responding to and benefiting from tensions and contradictions in organizational life. For example, Hart-Davidson showed how writers not only deal with but also learn from and integrate the many interruptions and distractions they encounter during writing processes [6]. As Johnson-Eilola also demonstrated in his studies of workplace architectures, distraction, what he called “the DataCloud,” offers a productive heuristic for creative workers [8]. Similarly, tension and contradiction may also enable workers to find novel work-arounds. Spinuzzi profiled workers forced to negotiate “multiple interpenetrating activities,” activities and documents overtly contradicting each other. Here, contradiction produced innovative and useful devices and policies [15].

Reporting from a slightly different workplace context, Murphy showed airline flight attendants simultaneously accommodating and resisting managerial policies (dress codes, weight requirements, curfews). Through interactions, symbolic behaviors, and public and private rituals, attendants created informal networks for personal and occupational support [11]. Extrapolating to the networks of information design, it appears that at some point, certainly, users rebel. But that point seems unpredictable and remarkably durable. In an effort to understand user compliance with what appeared as disingenuous IT activity, Faber theorized that users seemed to trade “politeness” in organizational communication for individual self-interest [2, p. 148]. Faber studied an IT policy committee that did not question a proposed organization-wide ban on Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) even though the technology would benefit other groups in the organization. Noting that committee members were already provided free long distance phone service in their offices, Faber argued that (at least in this network) regardless of the larger organization, members would not challenge disingenuous communication when that communication served their own individual self-interest [2, pp. 148-150; see also 10].

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

SigDoc '07, October 22-24, 2007, El Paso, TX USA.

Copyright 2007 ACM 1-58113-000-0/00/0004...\$5.00.

2: THEORETICAL FRAMING

This paper reports on the early stages of a study investigating the discursive structure of opposition (resistance to change) within organizational dynamics. Resistant discourses and their relations to power have been the subject of considerable study in discourse studies, cultural studies, sociology, and political science [4; 5; 13; 14]. In most cases, the term “resistance” describes efforts by groups or individuals to oppose powerful or dominant (hegemonic) agents. Dialectically, resistance is an important contributor to power. Without resistance, power becomes sheer domination [4, p. 114; 14, p. 82]. Thus, resistance both supports and undermines the use of power. In the same way, resistance enables change. As organizational networks are formed and reformed, activities of change and resistance structure and restructure personal interest, group loyalties, and associated investments of power and capital.

In earlier reports, Faber detailed discourse features associated with changing social systems within organizations [2, 3]. Arguing that change occurs both as a material and discursive process, Faber argued that specific formal features of language act to alternatively destabilize and restabilize social conditions within groups. These features included dynamic and synoptic clauses (dynamic = high clause/sentence ratio; synoptic = fewer clauses/sentence ratio), presuppositions combined with modality and the progressive aspect (is/are ___ing), and given/new topic replacement [see 2]. According to the model, linguistic features simultaneously reflect and construct networks as more-or-less stable. As networks are constituted as less stable, they become more available for transformation and ultimately re-stabilization.

Following these studies, the next question seems to be whether we can identify specific features that mark and potentially enable opposition-to-change within the forum of a change discourse. Are there specific discourse features that make change vulnerable, whose deployment makes a potential change disperse and ultimately fizzle out?

3. DATA SET & ANALYSIS

The study is based on an email exchange among association members in which a writer offers a proposal for changing the way members post email to a list. In what seems to be a relatively benign request, the author (Sam) proposes people posting to the list “avoid attaching previous posts” to their email in an attempt to make the list “more usable” (see Figure 1). The proposal was an overt attempt to change individual behavior (communication norms) among the group. In addition, the request embedded the assumption that writers (designers) are ultimately responsible for the efficacy/usability of their documents. Over the course of the resulting conversation this construction of writer-based-usability became the point of contention and resistance.

In subsequent posts, respondents subtly and then more overtly subverted the attempted change. In what ultimately became a discursive piling on, a final respondent was remarkably chastising. The end result of Sam’s proposal, ironically, was the practical and ideological reinforcement of very practices the change had intended to disrupt. Figure 1 presents Sam’s original proposal.

Sent: Friday, April 20, 2007 11:49 PM

To: Association

Subject: Minor Irony?

Greetings all –

I’m a longtime lurker, but a first-time poster. I know that the list is currently engulfed - as is the rest of the nation, and rightly so - in a discussion of the VPI tragedy; however, my digest of Thursday afternoon’s e-mails finally forced me to speak up about something that has been in the back of my mind for quite some time. We are technical communicators. We understand usability - to some extent. We understand the conventions of readable documentation. Our listserv is high on unreadable.

Aside from the HTML mail (easy to avoid), which renders sporadic chunks of the message in code (as in the following, only on a far greater scale),

```
-apple-text-size-adjust: auto; text-transform: none; orphans: 2;=white-space: normal; widows: 2; word-spacing: 0px; "><SPAN =class=3D"Apple-style-span" style=3D"border-collapse: separate; =
```

We include past messages as attachments in a reply. I love reading the digest, and whenever there are fewer than five posts I can easily scroll through the garbage to find the actual posts, but any more and it takes far too long - Thursday’s digest included exactly 6682 (yes, six thousand, six hundred and eighty-two) *individual lines* of text that were *not* part of the current content. I’d like to ask that we create some set of basic guidelines for submission, and I’ll posit my own right now for your consideration:

1. When posting to ATTW, please turn off HTML in your mail client. Apple Mail has a preference pane for this, Thunderbird asks whenever you send mail, and I’m sure that Outlook has a similar function. Plain text will work quite well, and everyone will be able to read it.

2. Unless quoting a previous message, please avoid attaching previous posts: either send a new message or remove the attachment from the “reply-to” message.

I know that this is my first posting, and it is rather off topic; however, I think that given our research and teaching interests, we should practice what we preach, especially in communications taking place in a professional context. As I stated, I do enjoy reading the list when I can, and I hope that next time, I can send out something a little more on-topic.

Thanks for your time,

Figure 1. Initial Proposal “Minor Irony”

In retrospect, the email enacts the problematics of a communication form/event encouraged by a ready and available “send” button. Employing a fairly naive rhetoric, Sam self-identifies as a new poster, oddly cultivating the ethos of an inexperienced voyeur (a “lurker”). Interrupting a discussion about the Virginia Tech shootings, the pathos is inappropriately off-topic. This leaves a rather strident logos which accuses the group of contradicting its own rhetorical values (“Our listserv is nigh on unreadable”). The conclusion (“thanks for your time”) is clichéd and violates the informal genres associated with most email contributions.

The proposal itself emerges from a seemingly reasonable plea to avoid extraneous lines of text tangential to ongoing discussions. Yet the change discourse relies on what will become a crucial assumption, writers are responsible for how easily readers use their texts. Sam asserts, in shorthand, *writer-based-usability* as a disciplinary value within this network. The cliché “we should practice what we preach” aggregates intention, invention, and form. The proposal thus resurrects what Spinuzzi called the trope of the “worker-as-victim,” a reader who is “in need of rescue” by enlightened usability practices [15, p. 1-2]. The proposal is equally an ideological claim about how people should (be able to) interact with technology. Its change would situate usability as the designer’s burden.

As a discourse, the email reflects the patterns constituted by other texts of change [2]. The email is constructed dynamically, with a 1:2.96 sentence:clause ratio. The first paragraph, which establishes authorial ethos, reflects a more synoptic orientation (1:2.14). The argument establishing the rationale for the proposal is offered dynamically (1:3.2). The instructions constitute a more synoptic orientation (1:2.2) and the conclusion returns to a dynamic orientation (1:4.3). The potential for change is launched but in an uncertain and unstable way.

3.1 Supporting Response (Pat)

Despite an uncertain launch, the first email to respond to “Minor Irony” (Pat) agreed with the proposal, offering “I’m all for that.” Encouraging human intervention in the face of technological apathy, Pat added, “Frankly I am surprised that mail programs continue to quote entire messages by default. Some list software disallows posting messages that are primarily text.” The assertion continues to aggregate design, utility, and accountability again situating the designer as the accountable agent.

Sent: Saturday, April 21, 2007 12:01 AM
 Sent To: Association
 Subject: Re: Minor Irony?
 I am all for that. Frankly i am surprised that mail programs continue to quote entire messages by default. Some list software disallows posting messages that are primarily quoted text.

Figure 2 First Responding Email “Pat”

The form is synoptic (1:1.6) and serves to potentially stabilize both the pragmatic and the ideological change. The problematic sparking change (extraneous text) is naturalized through the use of “that.” Executed through the indefinite (we

can’t tell what “that” references), its use refers to and thus naturalizes the change.

3.2 Opposition Responds (Jack)

Overt opposition to the change appeared in the third email of this conversation [Figure 3]. Here, the author writes, “if I could refine this a bit, please *do* include the message you’re directly replying to, even if you’re not “quoting” it. The momentum for the change has been naturalized into the pronoun “this.” However, the “refinement” proposed here constitutes a practical reversal to Sam’s proposal.

Sent: Saturday, April 21, 2007 12:12 AM
 To: Association
 Subject: Re: Minor Irony?
 If I could refine this a bit, please *do* include the message you're directly replying to, even if you're not "quoting" it. Especially if your reply comes more than a few minutes after the original. Nothing's more baffling than getting a post that reads, "I agree with what Nancy said!" without any indication of what on earth that might have been.
 Many of us spend very few minutes per day sorting through hundreds of emails, most of which we delete within the first three seconds of reading. We do need to be (briefly) reminded of context from time to time.
 This is a much different thing from including a whole string of irrelevant emails which, in my observation, most of us avoid doing.

Figure 3 Email 3 – “Jack’s Opposition”

Unlike the initial posting, the author of Email 3 does not overtly claim an ethos but follows the more common listserv convention of jumping immediately into the topic. Such rhetorical shrewdness of course presents an experienced insider evoking a collective identity formation: “many of us spend very few minutes per day sorting through hundreds of emails...” The conclusion sets up a backhanded compliment asserting that change is unnecessary (“most of us avoid doing”). The pronouncement allows Sam’s concern to be legitimate (including extraneous lines is bad) but unnecessary (no one does it).

As a contributor to the larger discussion, Email 3 destabilizes the rhetorical context. The email reasserts a dynamic orientation (1:3.8), is hedged (“If...bit,” “many of us,” “in my observation”) and anecdotal. Although Jack asserts an ethos and a claim, the email does not construct a stabilized discourse. To an extent, such a dynamic orientation puts into play the type discursive capital Peck-MacDonald associated with humanities discourse [12, p. 111], which, she noted, emphasizes epideictic, performative rhetoric at the expense of the deliberative or judicial claims. The slight of hand accomplished here is a performative devaluation of the original proposal. Yet, the discourse leaves the case open. Formally, the rhetoric remains dynamic. And, although the proposal articulates a practical solution contrary to the original proposal, ideologically it actually reinforces Sam’s argument. Usability continues to be constituted as the designer’s burden.

3.3 Email 4 – Pat’s Rejoinder

At this point, Pat (author of email 2) rejoins the conversation in synoptic form: “Prune judiciously and use a threaded mail reader.” Pat continues, “Also consider headlines instead of ambiguous subject lines. Makes indexing and searching much easier.” Curtly synoptic (1:1.25) Pat included as an addendum the entire string of email preceding this post but “judiciously pruned” his own contribution (Email 2; Figure 2)

Sent: Saturday, April 21, 2007 12:20 AM
To: Association
Subject: Re: Minor Irony?
Prune judiciously and use a threaded mail reader. Also consider headlines instead of ambiguous subject lines. Makes indexing and searching much easier.

Figure 4. Email 4 “Pat” (addendum not included)

Pat’s construction is important for what is left out (elided). “Prune judiciously” assumes both the problematic of extraneous text and the writer’s role in addressing this problem. No longer needing to be overtly described, the rationale for change is made legitimate and thereby stabilized. The elision extends and reinforces a designer’s obligation to produce useable products. At this moment, the network appears to have aggregated designers, usability, and accountability. However, how to accomplish this aggregation remains in negotiation.

3.4 Oppositional Turns

The next two contributions appeared nearly simultaneously and significantly reconstituted the aggregation. Email 5 offered a purely technical and more importantly reader-based solution to the problem of extraneous text. The proposal suggested that readers adopt a MIME-format for reading listserv email. Here, the author offered, “I used to have the same problem with the listserv including code that made messages almost unreadable, but I found that switching to a MIME-format digest solved it.” He then offered detailed directions for engaging the MIME format. The post reflects the dynamic style in the introduction (1:3) and somewhat less in the conclusion (1:2.25) and the synoptic style when giving instructions. Predictably, the text is most stable as it lists instructions for technologizing the solution.

Email 5 overtly reconstituted the problem as technical (“the listserv including code that made messages almost unreadable”) and not the responsibility of good design. The author consented to the problem (extraneous text) but used the issue to assert an opposing ideology (the reader/user enacts usability). However, Email 5 was not repeated (copied) in any subsequent contribution to the thread. The contribution appeared bracketed from the larger conversation.

Email 6, which appeared at the same time as Email 5, also reconstituted usability as the user’s problem.

Sent: Saturday, April 21, 2007 12:42 AM
To: Association
Subject: Re: Minor Irony?
I've been using email since, oh, 1984 and the days of a 300 baud phone modem. Tragically, I am probably an emailer with one year of experience repeated 23 times. I'm currently using google's gmail, which will parse html or plain text, and hides the quoted portion unless told not too. In the past I've used various proprietary email systems like Fidonet, Pine (unix), Mutt, Eudora, Thunderbird, Apple mail, etc. and despite its limitations gmail has proven fairly adept at compensating for our collective misbehaviors. The gigs of storage mean that I don't even bother with reading digests. On the other hand, everything I've ever written here is subject to quick retrieval by googles corporate lapdogs, who seem to care as much about their user's privacy as they do about my ingrown toenail.
My concern is that the effort put into enforcing generic conventions will also dampen the vibe of the list, resulting in less posting. I find myself less alarmed at tech comm teachers who don't do usability, rhetoricians with poor rhetorical skills and doctors who aren't healers. The world is a broken place, and radically lowering my expectations has dulled some of the outrage over the years. I am not suggesting, incidentally, that anyone else take that approach, as it is cynical at best.

Figure 5. Email 6 “Daryl’s caveat emptor”

Like Jack’s earlier posting (Email 3), the writer of Email 6 (Daryl) used narrative, anecdotes, and other features of humanities discourse to construct the reader as ultimately responsible for using a text and not the designer/writer. The email evokes the dynamic style (1:3.5) as it transitions from anecdotal and epideictic in paragraph one to judicial (“the world is a broken place”) in paragraph 2. This is a rhetorical shift not completed in earlier opposing narratives. Importantly, the discourse semantically asserts the ideological position that “generic conventions” on the writer limit contributions and “dampen the vibe of the list.”

Daryl concluded the post by appending selections from Pat’s and Sam’s texts with sections “randomly removed...to save space and improve usability” simultaneously invoking and parodying Pat’s suggestion to “prune judiciously.” The overly epideictic inclusion renders Sam’s initial text to strings of jibberish (selection):

>> I'm rnoon's e-mails finally forced me to speak up about something that
>> understand the conventions of readable documentation. Our listserv is
>> nigh on unreadable.
>>ter scale),

Email 6 cast the form for subsequent contributions. The next 6 messages all asserted reader-based technological fixes for extraneous text; posts 9 and 10 directly maligned Sam. Email 9 offered “No offense Sam, but lighten up. The actual Irony is

that you asked everyone to jump genre, and came off stylistically like a Blue Meanie.” Email 10 scolded, “My first response, to Sam, not sent, was to keep lurking.” Only after Email 10 did a writer emerge to defend Sam’s proposal. That defense was not opposed and after a brief third post by Pat the thread seemed exhausted. The change had been successfully opposed and the conversation dissipated.

There is always more to the narrative, but my immediate question wonders what enabled a discourse to adeptly form against the proposed change.

4. WHAT ENABLES OPPOSITION?

Several limitations moderate my construction of this narrative. The number of participants in the conversation is small and each participant is self-selecting. Alternatively, only those who perceived a stake in the issue participated in the conversation. More significantly, it is problematic to structure the conversation as a causal narrative. Writers randomly and arbitrarily entered the conversation when they decided to check their email and read their association list. Yet, most contributors included previous postings suggesting a textual trace to which they were simultaneously responding and contributing. As such, the study is a small examination of one discourse during moments of contention. I will resist general claims here but instead will describe and propose several discursive forms/events that appeared have saliency during the conversation.

4.1 Stable / Unstable Discourses

Intuitively, we might assume that opposition to change would be readied when arguments appear less stable and vulnerable. However, in this conversation, opposition emerged and was constructed against the emergence of (more) stable (synoptic) discourses. Of course, we do not know if Daryl would have responded (in the same way) if Pat had not reinforced the change (“writers should prune judiciously”) or if Sam’s initial post had remained unanswered. Yet, in parodying Pat’s proposal, Daryl’s text reflects and constructs an awareness and an assumed vulnerability of the current conversation.

In this case, Sam’s change discourse did not appear threatening until it began to stabilize and emerge naturalized even in oppositional discourse (Jack’s post which reinforced writer-based usability). Once the change had stabilized, detractors appeared to de-stabilize not just the change but also the ongoing conversation that enabled the conditions for change. Recall, both opposing rejoinders (Jack, Daryl) occurred after synoptic contributions. Initial opposing discourses asserted a dynamic orientation and employed other unstable discursive forms (anecdotes, hedges, prepositional phrases). The semantic content of these emails (directly contradicting the change, parodying the proposal) suggests that politeness (face-saving) was not a motivator for the dynamic features. Instead, the discourse appeared motivated to disrupt the stabilizing aggregation.

Email 5, which offered sympathetic and synoptic advice (how to technologically fix the problem) was excluded (not copied/responded to) by subsequent posts. Omitting/ignoring the email suggests it was a tangential contribution to either competing aggregation. The point of the opposition seemed not to offer suggestions but to resist and disrupt the enacted change. In this way the opposition seemed to constitute the

change as an ideological claim and not merely a practical or technical problem.

4.2 Opposing Discourse Enact Their Own Stability

Of the 6 emails that appeared after Daryl’s dynamic re-aggregation, 4 overtly supported the opposition. Two further emails (not reproduced here) implicitly supported the opposition by asking technical questions about implementing software. The 4 overt arguments transitionally stabilized over 8 paragraphs. Figure 7 lists each paragraph by email and the sentence/clause ratio of the paragraph.

Contributions after Email 6	Sentence/Clause Ratio
(Email 7) paragraph 1	1:3.5
(Email 8) paragraph 1	1:3.5
paragraph 2	1:1.4
(Email 9) paragraph 1	1:2.5
paragraph 2	1:1.5
(Email 10) paragraph 1	1:2.5

Figure 6. Clausal dynamics in Email 7-10

The contributions in Emails 7-10 transitioned toward the synoptic style aggregating the opposition both in form and content. The content reasserted various ways readers could choose to use technology to control their interface and the synoptic form stabilized the discourse. By Email 9, the discourse was sufficiently stable to enable ad homonym attacks against Sam, a strategy rare in this public, ordinarily friendly forum. In this way, the opposition seemed to “close ranks” as it advanced.

5. CONCLUSION: DISCOURSES OF CHANGE

Social and material power within an organization is tied to the specific discourses people use to claim and assert authority and privilege. These discourses may be overt/repressed, hidden/popular, or active/static; alternative and subordinate discourses are necessary to legitimize other discourses and to provide forms for innovation, dissent, critique, and the possibility of change.

In order to maintain legitimacy, agents must have ways to limit competing discourses and ensure that forms/events of change are dissipated before gaining sufficient momentum to overtake other networks. This study has shown one example of these organizational dynamics, the case of extraneous text and usability within a technical communication association.

Usability can be a highly contentious discourse within and across this disciplinary organization (technical communication). Competing networks have aggregated their own models, approaches, values, opportunities, and rhetorical stances toward the subject [7; 15]. In the case outlined above, a writer employed one discourse of usability and claimed it to be the dominant (and only) form for the field. As that competing discourse began to stabilize, other actors entered the conversation to destabilize both the change and the

conversation that enabled the possibility of change. This is not to suggest that each writer consciously supported one or another construction of usability. Instead, for various reasons, writers employed discourses that achieved these purposes largely on their own. Nor do I wish to suggest that all change is resisted only when it becomes more stable. Instead, I would like to offer that what we see here are the nuances of discursive activities during a specific moment of change.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Clegg, S. Foucault, power and organizations. In McKinlay A. & Starkey, K. eds. *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*, London and Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 1998.
- [2] Faber, B. *Discourse, Technology and Change*. London & New York: Continuum, 2007.
- [3] Faber, B. Technologizing change: Rhetoric of software implementation at a university campus. In *Proceedings of SigDoc 2003*. ACM SigDoc: 171-177.
- [4] Faber, B. *Community Action & Organizational Change: Image, Narrative, Identity*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.
- [5] Fairclough, N. *Discourse and Power*. London: Longman, 1989.
- [6] Hart-Davidson, W. Reconsidering the basics of Technical Writing: What are the basic units of a quality writing project? Paper presented at the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication. October 2004. Paper available online at www.msu.edu/hartdav2/cptsc2004.pdf.
- [7] Johnson, R. *User-Centered Technology: A Rhetorical Theory for Computers and other Mundane Artifacts*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.
- [8] Johnson-Eilola, J. *DataCloud: Toward a new theory of online work*. Cresskill NJ: Hampton Press, 2005
- [9] Latour, B. *Reassembling the Social*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [10] Mirel, B. Product, process, and profit: The politics of usability in a software venture. *ACM Journal of Computer Documentation* 24: 185-203.
- [11] Murphy, A. Hidden transcripts of flight attendant resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly* 11 (4): 499-535.
- [12] Peck MacDonald, S. *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1994.
- [13] Scott, J. *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990.
- [14] Simons, J. *Foucault and the Political*. London and New York: Routledge.
- [15] Spinuzzi, C. *Tracing Genres Through Organizations: A Sociocultural Approach to Information Design*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.