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The Discursive Construction of Organisational Boundaries in Traditional and Electronic Networks

Nick Ellis
University of Leicester, UK
n.ellis@le.ac.uk

Sharon Purchase
University of Western Australia, Perth

Sid Lowe
Kingston Business School, UK

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Introduction

It is important for the parties involved in an exchange to consider carefully where they believe the boundaries of their firm lie (Blois, 2006). This paper explores the notion of boundaries around the actors known as 'organisations' in industrial networks. Following recent calls for researchers in marketing to appreciate the different constructions and meanings that people place on their experiences (e.g. Carson et al. 2001; Gomez Arias and Acebron, 2001; Gummesson, 2001), we take an interpretive approach to industrial networks founded in discourse analysis (Ellis, Lowe and Purchase, 2006). As part of this approach, we share the scepticism of Westwood and Linstead (2001: 4) as they question mainstream organisational theory and its taken-for-granted acceptance of "the existence of organisations as material entities 'out there' in the world".

In exploring these entities as constituted in discourse, our study draws upon textual data gathered from interviews with managers in European and Australasian contexts, the former involving a series of 'traditional' supply chains and the latter comprising buyers and suppliers in an 'e-marketplace'. These case contexts allow us to make comparisons between conventional and electronic networks. In so doing, we begin to add to our understanding of how participants make sense of the boundaries of their organisations in the context of "new and innovative ways of organising exchanges" (Blois, 2006: 149). This is an important area for research since industry reports have predicted e-marketplaces will facilitate over 25% of global B2B online transactions by the end of the current decade (Lord, 2001).

Theoretical Issues

The growth of electronically-mediated relationships, as well as the emergence of so-called 'partnership' forms of organising and collaborating within industrial networks (Marchington et al., 2005) have implications for how we make sense of organisational boundaries. Existing boundaries become problematic for (re)defining what is 'inside' and 'outside' the organisation and for (re)defining organisational identities. However, the literature on market-based inter-organisational-relationships (IORs) is sparse on the ways in which the individual actors involved in interactions make sense of the relation, of themselves and of the 'other'. There is a general neglect of managerial actors' understanding of IORs which is rather surprising given that, as Blois (1997: 369) notes, "organisations do not make decisions – people do in the name of organisations". Yet the role of boundary-spanning individuals in most management theories of business relationships is virtually unexplored (Osborn and Hagedoorn, 1997), a view confirmed by Gronhaug, Henjesand and Koveland (1999: 179) who assert that boundary spanners' "interpretations of events and constructions of explanations are largely overlooked in research on business relationships". There is thus a need to take research approaches to inter-firm exchange relationships into as yet largely unexplored social constructionist ways of network thinking.

Our problematisation of boundaries leads us also to question settled notions of identity, both of firms and the individuals who represent them. The concept of identity formation is important in collaborative IORs where parties interact because of their conceptions of who 'others' are and what they believe these others can contribute to their goals (Beech and Huxham, 2003). One way of developing co-operative practices within an IOR is to encourage parties to perceive co-operation not as a means but as an end in itself (Buckley and Casson, 1988). If all transactions are, in a sense, perceptual matters, "the question of how managers conceive of their companies, therefore, and conceive of the boundaries of their companies, is of the first importance" in the analysis of strategic alliances, partnerships and networks (Buckley and Chapman, 1997: 296). We thus need to look carefully at the vocabulary employed in managerial accounts of collaboration. This entails examining terms like transaction and relationship, or customer and supplier, not as these might be defined in advance by a hypothetico-deductive orientated researcher or even a management consultancy, "but as they are actually understood by the people who speak of them" (1997: 297).

Inter-organisational activities and relationships are linguistically constructed in managers' talk to produce particular ways of understanding such encounters. The roles of managers as boundary spanners are particularly interesting if we are to understand the ways in which people make sense of their dealings with organisational 'others'. Constructing difference and otherness is an inseparable aspect of organising, a critical part of this labour of division (Hetherington and Munro, 1997). Yet otherness is not an end result; rather, it is part of a constant process, where similarities and difference are articulated and visions of the world are contested. The move within marketing thought towards relational aspects is an implicit acknowledgement of differentiation and identity within the supply chain and the broader market. The discursive practices involved in these processes are, however, rarely identified within the marketing literature (Smith and Higgins, 2000).

Our study aims to go a small way towards remedying this neglect. We achieve this by identifying how linguistic elements can be combined to construct social categories, often in the form of organisational boundaries. Such categories effectively demarcate 'us', and 'them', thereby polarising particular groups and positions, and sustaining existing differences or creating new relations (van Dijk, 1993). As Beech and Huxham (2003: 29) explain: "The way that parties…identify themselves and each other seems likely to be significant in their ability to develop productive mutual relationships". Moreover, the crossing of social boundaries that is involved in attempting to 'develop' IORs is likely to emphasize (and be re-emphasized by) the distinction between oneself and others.

Methodology

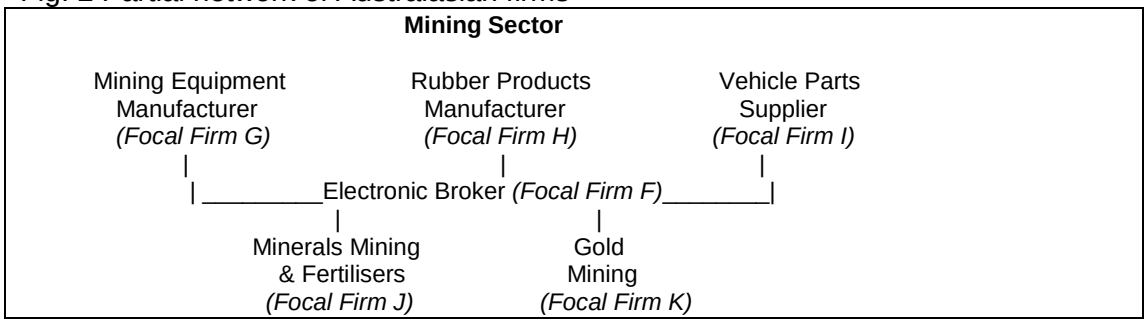
We set out to discover how social actors make sense of IORs and thus form perceptions of the world in which they work. By adopting a discourse analytical approach to organisations and, indeed, organisation/organising (Iedema, 2003; Keenoy and Oswick, 2003; Woodilla, 1998), we analyse the linguistic construction of boundaries in buyer-supplier relationships.

The majority of the European data were collected via tape-recorded field-based interviews, each lasting over an hour, with managers holding some sort of responsibility for IORs. The interviews were semi-structured and centred on the perceived 'management' of network relationships. Notes were also taken at a company conference and a training event. Participants comprised thirteen boundary-spanners working for five different firms embedded in what were described by participants as marketing channels for agricultural, textile-related and automotive products.

Fig.1 Partial networks of European firms

Australasian data collection involved a similar qualitative case study approach, although this time the trading environment under investigation centred on one sector, that of mining, where a hub firm acted as an electronic 'broker' for exchanges between high-tech buyers and sellers trading in mining equipment, mining services and automotives. Here, a total of seven participants were interviewed from six organisations. The case contexts are re-presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Fig. 2 Partial network of Australasian firms



The analysis that follows seeks to address some of the shortcomings of the industrial network literature by offering a discursive analysis of managerial accounts (Tompkins and Cheney, 1983) of IOR processes. These accounts construct a series of boundaries, and thus potentially identity-constructing connections (Cooper, 1986), around and between reified individual and organisational actors embedded 'in' the context of industrial supply chains. Our approach recognises, however, that the production of discourse is not contained 'within' a social setting, "but is shaped by intersecting (con)texts" (Kuhn, 2006: 1342). In this way, an understanding of the operational setting is key to any analysis of managerial talk (or discourse) as such discourse inter-textually appropriates Discourses (with a capital 'D') from the broader social context, a context that is, to an extent, imposed by us, the analysts. Thus we have to acknowledge that Figures 1 and 2 necessarily constitute our syntheses (or re-drawing) of participants' network pictures (Ford and Redwood, 2005).

Kreidler (1998) notes that every language has 'deictic' words which 'point' to 'things' in the physical-social context of the speaker. Through such referential devices, speakers establish linkage between their utterances and elements in a situational context. In analysing our data, we examine closely the use of deictic shifters (typically pronouns, but also terms like 'here' and 'there') in the speech of participants as they account for the management of relationships. In particular, the constructive implications for positioning the focal firm (and/or the individual self) of lexemes such as 'we' and 'I' will be considered. In addition, the discursive construction of the 'other' in competitive marketplaces, as well as in inter-firm collaborations will be discussed, for instance in the use of pronouns like 'us' and 'them'.

Findings

Findings are summarised in Tables 1 and 2, with textual excerpts supplied to indicate each main discursive construction. The reader will note that the language within many of these excerpts performs more than one positioning task simultaneously, a fact to which we shall return in our discussion. The 'objects' in Table 1 represent the various categories of actors that are described in managers' accounts. The 'concepts' in Table 2 represent culturally and historically situated frames that network participants appear to use for understanding social reality (Ellis et al, 2006).

The machinations and implications of these boundary constructions are explored below. In our analysis we ask, how do managers discursively draw and maintain a boundary between themselves, their firms and their customers and suppliers? How do they construct an image of the 'other' and simultaneously position their own identities? How are these boundary-marking practices related to relationship management issues within the different networks that we examine? As we ask these questions, we begin to extend the notion of boundaries from organisations to those surrounding individuals, relationships and even markets.

Table 1: discourse demarcating boundaries around network actors

Objects	*Examples from Traditional European context*	*Fr.*	*Examples from e-market Australasian context*	*Fr.*	*Main construction/ positioning facilitated in discourse*
Individual self - speaker	I like to be out there, making the sales for the merchant. - Animal Feeds	Hi	I mean, we, I, my, the fact that I'm accountable and responsible to make all this work will be impacted. - Minerals/Fertiliser	Med *	Speaker as a bounded individual. ('I'; 'me'; 'in here')
Organisational self - focal firm	They're all telling us who we should be working with. -Textile Machinery	Hi	We need to log into the site, [but] the response time we get via (broker firm's name) isn't all that good. - Mining Equipment	Hi	Speaker's organisation as a bounded entity. ('we'; 'us'; in here')
Individual others - other people	They [merchants] call me and tell me that they've just had a farmer in who's mentioned that he's seen me the day before. - Animal Feeds	Hi	It …remove[d] that personal relationship because you're only dealing with the electronic transmissions…and you tend to lose that personal contact with people. - Rubber Products	Low *	Others as bounded, separate individuals. ('him'; 'he'; 'out there')
Organisational other - customer	We do have a lot of internal customers and relationships with other departments, er, but a lot of our output is for the dealer network. - Automobiles	Hi	You have to take companies on a case-to-case basis…[are] they of sufficient size to be accepted as a reputable buyer? - Mining Equipment	Hi	Customer organisations as bounded, separate entities. ('them'; they'; 'out there')
Organisational other - supplier	We've got eight different suppliers out there, all of whom we're supplying their products to the market. -Textile Machinery	Med	We don't allow, [in] any shape or form, the buyers to gang up on suppliers. - Broker	Med	Supplier organisations as bounded, separate entities. ('them'; they'; 'out there')
Organisational other - competitor	They go into Ford and Ford says, 'Ah yes we know who Johnson Controls are. We want to buy your product'. - Textile Machinery	Med	They're not going to differentiate between a (firm's name) product and a product out of China. - Rubber Products	Med	Competitor organisations as bounded, separate entities. ('them'; they'; 'out there')
Organisational other – broker	N/A	N/A	They want to stand in the middle and provide the best technological solution for the buyer and the supplier. - Vehicle Parts	Med	Broker organisation as bounded, separate entity. ('them'; they'; 'between here and there')

* indicates difference in relative frequency of occurrence between traditional and e-market

Table 2: discourse constructing relationships between network actors

Concepts	*Examples from Traditional European context*	*Fr.*	*Examples from e-market Australasian context*	*Fr.*	*Main construction/ positioning facilitated in discourse*
Marketplace interactions – transactional	Vans are dead easy to sell to, er, the marketplace. - Automobiles The issue is what product you think is advanced compared to what you're competing with, and are those products going into the markets that are growing? - Textile Machinery	Med	(Customer firm's name 1) haven't transacted as much as they said they would…it is disappointing that they haven't done it as much as (Customer firm's name 2). - Mining Equipment We don't necessarily align ourselves specifically with a customer. - Vehicle parts	Hi *	Naturalised trading with customers in 'the market'. IORs based on material & economic exchange between actors. Competing organisations within the marketplace.
Partnership interactions - relational	Our philosophy is to work in partnership… and because we've got a good relationship with our suppliers, getting them to manufacture a tailor-made solution. - Textile Machinery Joe's quite a big socialiser as well, so they did a lot of stuff that he was invited to by them. He supported them as much as us really. It was really a two-way relationship. - Automobiles	Hi	They saw us as having the expertise to fix that problem, then they invited us to participate and through a joint effort we've come up with a product. - Mining Equipment We will have people…to maintain the contact because it is still an important part. If you don't maintain that relationship, you just see your sales float away. - Gold Mining	Low *	IORs based on mutual benefits shared between 'partners'. IORs based, at least in part, on social exchange between people. Actors as either 'in' or 'out' of a particular relationship.

* indicates difference in relative frequency of occurrence between traditional and e-market

Traditional European context

We have organised our analysis of managers' talk around three sets of macro Discourses: those representing boundaries around organisations, boundaries around markets and boundaries around relationships (or partnerships). The use of various lexemes and grammatical devices - including deictic shifters - by speakers drawing upon these Discourses positions the objects and construct the concepts summarised in Tables 1 and 2 above, including those that seem to define a managerial self.

<u>The Discourse of boundaries around organisations</u>

The *boundaries around organisations* Discourse is used extensively and repeatedly by all the European managers in the study, with very little variation in occurrence across sector, management hierarchy or function. Note the following two examples:

> Participant - I think the worst thing in production-led organisations is that they won't accept…the message that comes in from the outside world.
> Researcher - And the outside world being?
> Participant - The marketplace.
> Marketing Director, Textiles/Furniture

> We've got nearly 400 dealers out there and, er, I don't know, three or four salesmen in each dealership…so the stuff [brochures] that Anne has been working on is designed to go out to them and make their lives a bit easier.
> Marketing Assistant, Automobiles

Individual managers are often constructed as 'being in' or 'going out to' certain locations or organisations. Such use of language suggests that the speaker views him/herself and other actors as positioned largely in terms of organisational boundaries. Here, for instance, the term "field" is a metaphor for 'outside-ness' - it hints at 'getting your hands dirty', or 'real' as opposed to 'head office' work:

> Ideally I'd like to go out and work in the field, have some sort of interaction between the (manufacturer's name) manufacture and, er, the (dealership name) support franchises. Sort of a field manager's job.
> Dealership Marketing Manager, Automobiles

A large majority of 'outside' actors are constructed as customers; customers with distinct boundaries themselves. Examples of this can be found in both market and vertically quasi-integrated case contexts:

> The customers aren't out there to prove you wrong…so, you know, you go into this many businesses and the more detail you can get into someone's business, the more you understand it.
> Sales Executive, Textile Machinery

> You'd like to think that those on the inside would share your vision as to where to go. However, you need a champion in the dealer.
> District Sales Manager, Automobiles

We find a large proportion of utterances position both the firm (or the self) and an 'other' (whether organisational or individual). In the first of the examples that follow, it is interesting to note how the possessive pronoun "our" is used by the participant even though she goes on to emphatically (via repetition) position the designer as "external", thus defining the relative positions of the parties in this relationship. In other words, Sue may be 'outside' the focal firm, but she still 'belongs' to 'us':

> Participant - The next job then was to sit down with Sue, with our designer, Susan Jones.
> Researcher - And this is an internal person?
> Participant - No, external. This is an external agency.
> Marketing Assistant, Automobiles

Boundary erection also takes place between the head office/manufacturer and the dealer/customer in the automobile case. Note, however, how the speaker attempts to position himself apart from the claimed head office 'mentality'. The fact that he does so with explicit reference to physical and 'mental' positioning suggest quite a subtle understanding of the notion of identity:

> People who've been internally in our company for ten years…I mean in head office as opposed to interacting with dealers on a regular basis. They're very, 'That's them and where they're based'…Whereas I'm, although starting to fall into that geographical position, definitely not falling into it mentally."
> District Sales Manager, Automobiles

As found in the previous account, the construction of individual positions using the *organisational boundaries* Discourse is actually more common that those of organisational positions. This positioning occurs for others and the self. In the first example, a number of 'other' actors are positioned in terms of their management practices:

> Researcher - Is business pretty much normal? [i.e. in the wake of the foot and mouth epidemic]
> Participant - Yes, um, the difference is of course that the reps haven't been able to get out on farm.
> Admin/Quality Manager, Animal Feeds

Here, the participant is attempting to legitimise his own strategy since coming 'into' this organisation:

> The focus in the last five years since I've been here has been on the public sector because when you deal with OEMs they're very fickle people and…they could decide to manufacture their own seating, and that would be a classic example that has taken place in this business [the speaker's organisation].
> Marketing Director, Textiles/Furniture

We thus see a considerable reliance by participants on the *boundaries around organisations* Discourse to give meaning to an 'external' environment comprising individuals and organisations. These 'things' that apparently exist 'out there' are then attended to in manager's discourse as they describe some of the processes that make up interactions in IORs. Further, the dichotomy between being 'in' or 'out' seems to resonate strongly for our participants. For instance, it seems that the discursive formulation of 'getting out' of head office and 'into' customers (and indeed IORs) is valorised.

<u>The Discourse of (and/or lack of) boundaries around markets</u>

This Discourse is founded on the concept of 'the customer', who is sometimes cast as an end user, thus reinforcing the structure of the supply chain. The customer represents an 'other' with whom trade is possible, and indeed necessary, for the implied survival of the focal firm. The act of 'trading' (implying some form of exchange) with the customers that comprise 'the market', is naturalised throughout managers' discourse. Furthermore, 'the marketplace' metaphor generates an image of competing traders, all vying for the customer's business. Ironically, this can also construct a *lack* of boundaries, given that competitors can legitimately enter new markets and usurp existing IORs.

The evocation of the market as a place (physical or metaphorical) where some sort of exchange takes place is commonplace. For instance, here the speaker refers to customers "spending" and "buying essentials":

> In terms of a market overview, farmers are spending less, and they are buying essentials only.
> Managing Director, Animal Feeds

There can be different 'levels' of marketplace. In the next account, the participant makes it clear who comprises the "real" market for the automobile manufacturer; in other words, the "end customer", as opposed to the construction offered before ("my customers, the dealers"). Even though the dealer customer must presumably 'buy in' to the manufacturer's "ideas", it is the 'end' market that must "buy" goods in order for the focal firm to be "successful":

> So I saw myself as…needing to go and then be the wholesaler of their concepts, strategic direction, ideas, processes to my customers, the dealers. If they, if they put, if they carried them out, then the real end customers, for want of a better description, would buy and therefore we'd be successful.
> District Sales Manager, Automobiles

The Discourse is used occasionally to refer to upstream IORs, with the focal firm cast as customer, and also, slightly more often, it is used to construct a marketplace full of competitors. In the instance below, we see the speaker painting a picture of a focal firm faced with a choice of potential IORs upstream and, seemingly, several competing organisations trying to trade downstream. It is in such evocations that the 'unboundedness' of the market becomes apparent. The example is particularly expressive of the market mechanism where the "noise" is being made about lower prices:

> If you get new people in the marketplace and they've [new supplier] been making a lot of noise, then if they [existing supplier] react…it doesn't really justify us moving.
> Purchasing Manager, Animal Feeds

In many instances, the *(lack of) boundaries around markets* Discourse is used to locate power with a customer actor, often when managers speak of the market

competition faced both by their organisations and by their customers. Here, the speaker refers as well to the power exerted by these downstream competitors over the focal firm, thus constructing the entire network as functioning according to the Discourse of the unfettered market:

> They've [dealers] got much wiser because they've been exposed to more and more sources of supply, and, and they're under greater threat as well from all their competition…Yeah, those are, um marketing organisations, you know, groups where dealers get together, then they use their leverage.
> Marketing Director, Textiles/Furniture

Most of the positions constructed via the use of this Discourse are for organisational rather than individual actors. As such, we frequently encounter the pronouns 'us' and 'we' in managers' discourse. The Discourse is often drawn upon to positively position the speaker's own organisation. The following account constructs something called "the marketplace", with the term "leaders" suggesting that the focal firm faces some sort of metaphoric 'race' against the competition, a race that it is apparently winning:

> I think everybody's conscious of the fact that we need not only to survive but need to still maintain the fact that we are leaders in the marketplace.
> Admin/Quality Manager, Animal Feeds

Here, the speaker also hints at a dominant market position, thus positioning the focal firm against some 'others', even though they are not explicitly referred to in the comment. This position is claimed to offer the firm certain market 'opportunities' (note how the product is not just a 'product', but a "product opportunity"). Note too how the opportunity was "brought to us" with indeterminate agency, but clearly by an actor that can legitimately 'enter' this unbound market:

> This product opportunity is under license from a German manufacturer. It was brought to us because of our position in the marketplace.
> Marketing Director, Textiles/Furniture

Despite such use of the Discourse, any notion of 'the marketplace' as a purely physical locale (which of course would be quite appropriate in the agricultural context of the animal feeds case) is now largely irrelevant. Through metaphorical elaboration, the market-as-place has been substituted for a construction of the market as process of buying and selling (Dilley, 1992). The meaning of the term market/marketplace varies according to the speaker's perceived position in the buyer-seller relationship. For managers representing the animal feeds manufacturer, for instance, the market(place) seems to comprise; at one level, farmers' merchants; at another, farmers themselves; and at further levels, ever more spatially distant from the focal firm, supermarkets and ultimate consumers. Findings thus illustrate how the (socially constructed) status of these different customers affects managers' perceptions and (claimed) actions as they attempt to manage IORs throughout the supply chain.

<u>The Discourse of boundaries around relationships</u>

The function performed by the *boundaries around relationships* Discourse is perhaps less to do with individual (self-contained) identity construction than with building a picture of relationships as bounded objects that "exist":

> The relationship that, like, Joe, the Fleet Manager at Dealer X built with his customers doesn't seem to exist in Dealer Y.
> Dealership Marketing Manager, Automobiles

The occurrence of certain possessive pronouns such as "their" in participants' accounts suggests that these IORs can be 'possessed' by social actors. Here, the speaker is explaining that whilst his head office may get involved in fleet sales negotiations, "we don't do any direct supply stuff" because, it seems, it is the dealers that 'own' the relationship with the customer:

> We're in the market to repeat sell so (…) we involve the dealer from the start. It's their relationship and their rapport.
> District Sales Manager, Automobiles

In a similar manner, this participant uses the 'welcoming' metaphor of coming "on board" to effectively encircle two different supplier relationships:

> Participant - For a number of years there was only one supplier of rock salt… Another supplier came on board and virtually overnight the price reduced quite considerably.
> Researcher - So do you still deal with the original company?
> Participant - Yeah we do, because we want to keep them on board.
> Purchasing Manager, Animal Feeds

The majority of relationships are portrayed with power being located with the customer, an actor with whom "a relationship" must be "maintained", as in this instance, where 'bigness' apparently deserves recognition:

> Farmers, the big ones, are getting bigger, and the fewer bigger farmers, those need to be serviced and a relationship maintained with them.
> Managing Director, Animal Feeds

Having said this, much talk using the *boundaries around relationships* Discourse seems to indicate a sense of mutuality and interdependence within the relationship portrayed:

> We do a supplier profile in each newsletter [sent to customers] cos that's important that that relationship is, is there. And what I like to think is our suppliers have the expertise in R&D, manufacturing, right, and we have the expertise in the sales, marketing and after sales side.
> Managing Director, Textile Machinery

So, 'who' or 'what' are relationships constructed as being between: organisations or individuals representing those organisations? This is a question that appears to vex at least two of our participants, as shown in these reflexive comments:

> Researcher - Are you able to characterise what you see as a good relationship with a customer?
> Participant - With a farmer customer, or a merchant?
> Researcher - Well, perhaps both, and are they different?
> Participant - Okay. Well, dealing with the farmer customer first of all, um, you mean from my own perspective or the company perspective?
> Marketing Manager, Animal Feeds
>
> Researcher - Is the relationship they [dealers] have with you, the District Sales Manager, or with [Manufacturer Name]?
> Participant - Yes is the awkward answer! (smiles) They, er, they see the District Sales Manager as the most valuable, they should and they almost always do, as the most valuable cog in, in the linkage between [Manufacturer Name] and, I mean, you are their mouthpiece.
> District Sales Manager, Automobiles

Note how in the first example, a contrast is set up by the participant between individual and organisational 'perspectives'. In the second quote the speaker uses the "cog" metaphor to evoke some sort of supply chain 'machine' that comprises certain parts (i.e. actors) that must fit together via relationships in order to 'work'.

Taking this notion further, here this manager uses a 'breaking down of sides' metaphor to position the customer and the speaker (or his firm – the "you" is ambiguous) as actors that need to be on the same 'side' (or 'in' a relationship):

> With these guys [machine operator end users], if you get them on your side, you build them up, the machine goes in, they hit the ground running and you have a good install.
> Managing Director, Textile Machinery

As the preceding accounts indicate, although organisational identities are more often constructed than individual identities, individuals are also discursively positioned. For

example, this participant constructs his role as follows. The apparently second person "you" used here actually refers to the speaker himself. The deictic shifter "our" then serves to make the ultimate "vision" a corporate one:

> And the remit is, really, the company's mission deliverer…Use whatever tactics you like to get these people [dealers] to share our vision and take our vision directly to the marketplace.
> District Sales Manager, Automobiles

Overall, we find a high proportion of claims of mutually-orientated relationships that both parties are equally positioned as 'being' within. The Discourse erects a boundary around the IORs described, with the result that the majority of participants seem to view relationships as 'things' that have boundaries, boundaries that individuals and organisations must try and protect or breach as necessary. As we shall explain in our later Discussion section later of this paper, this world-view has implications for the relationship management practices of our individual participants.

e-market Australasian context

Compared to the traditional supply chain contexts analysed above, we find a similar set of network actors being evoked in managers' discourse; discourse which draws upon the same macro Discourses to erect boundaries once again around reified organisations. The construction of an additional category of organisation is found here, however; that of the broker firm.

<u>The Discourse of boundaries around organisations</u>

Like the European cases, this Discourse is used extensively by all the Australasian managers in the study. As shown in the following two stanzas, it commonly constructs a separate yet connected set of organisational actors in the form of the focal firm ("we") and customer firms ("them").

> We provide them with ideas to look at areas in their business.
> IT Manager, Vehicle Parts
>
> We can go to those types of clients and say, 'Hey, this is what we have provided in the past to other companies'.
> Sale Manager, Rubber Products

Both of the above participants appear to be reasonably positive about inter-firm relationships in the e-marketplace. In contrast, the accounts below hint at less optimistic perceptions of this trading context. The speakers position their organisations as quite consciously separate from certain other network actors, actors that are evoked by company names, and not those of individuals. Thus "we" are allowed to 'say' things or 'consider' actions in relation to a distanced collective other, whether a customer or the broker firm:

> We felt like we got used, so we politely said to (buying firm's name), 'We won't be, um, er, involved in any other auctions in the future'.
> Sale Manager, Rubber Products
>
> We as a company considered the eventuality that we might not use (broker firm's name).
> E-business Director, Gold Mining

In an example of a less common discursive occurrence, this manager draws upon the Discourse to construct both individuals and organisations. Note how he initially proclaims the significance of individual actors' "experiences", then reverts to the deictic shifter "we" to erect an organisational boundary:

> To a degree, yeah, well, you and I depend upon our past experiences…and sometimes we have been burned in the past by customers who've been really hard to deal with.
> Sales Manager, Rubber Products

Here, the role of individuals is even less valorised since "these big companies" can seemingly undermine the "approach" of the selling firm:

> We try and have a multi-tier approach, but, um it's difficult because a lot of these big companies do chop and change staff so much.

IT Manager, Vehicle Parts

This speaker is similarly keen to stress the 'employee' status of individual actors as he attempts to resolve any confusion over the fiduciary responsibility of managers representing the broker firm:

> We also point out to them [supplier firms] that everybody who works for (Broker firm's name) is an employee of (Broker firm's name) and not a, not an employee of the buyer organisations.
> Regional VP 1, Broker

Thus we find an overall e-market that is populated by organisational actors with clearly-defined boundaries, much like the discursive objects comprising the traditional supply chain context discussed earlier. Nevertheless, a noticeable difference in linguistic practice between contexts is that individual managerial actors are constructed much less commonly in the Australasian case.

We also find a similar dichotomy to the European context in the evocation of two contrasting discursive relational concepts, as shown in the following two sub-sections. Here, however the market itself is constructed as more rigidly bounded than in the European cases.

<u>The Discourse of boundaries around markets</u>

Again, we encounter customers positioned as sovereign in participants' talk, typically constructed as actors with the key potential to 'transact'. Many utterances by Australasian managers serve to mark boundaries to the market. In so doing, they reify the market(place) as an arena which organisations may enter ('join') or leave:

> At that time, remember, (broker firm's name) was trying to get suppliers on board.
> Sales Manager, Rubber Products

> Those suppliers that have joined and haven't transacted are the, um, have used the marketplace for, um, marketing purposes.
> Regional VP 1, Broker

Perhaps unsurprisingly, managers representing the broker firm appear to be acutely aware of the need to reinforce the existence of this "marketplace" as a bounded venue where organisations ("buyers and suppliers") can interact:

> It's not in our interests to share information between buyers and suppliers because we lose credibility and, um, it that had to happen, our buyers and suppliers will leave the e-marketplace…and the marketplace will actually close.
> Regional VP 2, Broker

> We have another committee which does content, they define the standards around content like, um, because suppliers can put content onto the marketplace like SKU, stocktaking units.
> Regional VP 1, Broker

The need to maintain the legitimacy of this discursive concept is also shown in this account from a representative of a selling firm who attributes certain behaviours to organisations in an earlier (different) e-marketplace:

> They were ganging up on them [suppliers], um, and it turned out it caused negative feelings all over the marketplace.
> Sales Manager, Rubber Products

Although most talk using the Discourse of *boundaries around m*arkets positions organisational actors, there are some instances of individuals being evoked. Here, the speaker claims that "some companies" might be 'concerned' about the electronic site but then shifts the level of actor to himself via a deictic "I":

> I think some companies have expressed, um, concerns about security issues in (e-marketplace name) but I must admit that I find it quite a secure site.
> Contracts Manager, Mining Equipment

We also find some rare examples of discourse that breaks down the walls surrounding the market in this context. This even occurs, as in the second account below, in the talk of a manager from the broker firm. Once again, we see the predominance of constructions of organisational actors:

> The anti-competitive group in the US, they all raised their heads and said, 'No way'. That was seen as a big 'No, no', [and] to stifle competition and so we, it was knocked on the head pretty quick.
> Procurement Manager, Minerals/Fertilisers

> Any buyer or any supplier can join. We're open, ah, it's an open marketplace.
> Regional VP 2, Broker

<u>The Discourse of boundaries around relationships</u>

Less widespread in the e-market context is the Discourse of *boundaries around relationships*. Nevertheless, participants do use this partnership-orientated Discourse to suggest a relational conception of IORs, typically between focal firms and their customers. Some of these accounts suggest relationships are founded on economic exchange while others hint at a more social connection:

> We look at how long that customer might be there and how much money we can make by having regular, ongoing, sustainable transactions with our customer.
> IT Manager, Vehicle Parts

> We've certainly jointly sponsored a golf day from a couple of the mines.
> Contracts Manager, Mining Equipment

Building on the latter example above, the Discourse is also drawn upon to construct IORs that existed before (or quite apart from) any of the electronically mediated relationships brokered in the e-marketplace between customer and supplier organisations:

> Ninety-nine percent of our suppliers have established relationships with their buying organisations already.
> Regional VP 1, Broker

Finally, although organisational categories dominate the talk of participants, there are some relatively rare instances of individual actors ("you" and "people") as well as organisational ones being constructed in the use of this Discourse. Both these stanzas reify the "relationship" as something that actors can choose to be part of (or not):

> If you didn't want a relationship…then there's no reason tomorrow for them not to go and deal with someone else transactionally.
> IT Manager, Vehicle Parts

> If you have quite personable people that are employed by us and you have a relationship with…those people, um, their characters will begin and that forms part of that trust relationship…You try to build that rapport.
> Sales Manager, Rubber Products

Discussion

Despite the congruence in the categorisation of organisational 'others' across our traditional and e-market contexts, we may note a difference in the apparent salience (at least based on the relative frequency of occurrence recorded in Tables 1 and 2 – see asteriks*) to participants of four key discursive positionings. These are most strongly reflected in the deictic shifters that construct: (i) the object of the individual 'self'; (ii) the object of the individual 'other'; (iii) the concept of market-based transaction, and, conversely, (iv) the concept of partnership-based interactions. Constructions (i) and (ii) are less prevalent in the e-market case, as is (iv); moreover, (iii) is more commonly expressed amongst Australasian participants.

These observations suggest that e-market participants view themselves rather more in terms of the organisations they represent than as the individual managerial actors more commonly constructed (alongside the focal firm) in the discourse of participants in traditional trading contexts. In terms of identity construction, we thus see that the

boundaries between the 'self' and the 'organisation' are less starkly drawn in the e-marketplace: here, speakers typically evoke their firm as the principle network actor, and thereby suppress their own individual significance in processes of interaction.

Findings also indicate that the Australasian managers in our study perceive the e-marketplace to be much more atomised and the actors more anonymous than the closer relations between individuals (i.e. 'people' rather than just 'firms') that exist alongside IORs in the world-views of the European managers operating within traditional supply chains. Any attempts to improve relationship management in the former, arguably more innovative, manner of organising exchanges will need to bear in mind these more rigid boundaries and the resultant stemming of flows of social capital between actors.

As we noted earlier, it is also important to appreciate that the different concepts and objects listed above (and how they are discursively positioned) are evoked by participants 'in' the same network, representing the same organisation, and sometimes even within the same stanza of discourse. The constructions appear to shift, depending on the speaker's perspective and the specific operating context being described. This suggests little sense of 'closure' (either for an individual manager, or between managers) around what it means to be part of an organisation and still less over what it may mean to be part of a relationship, or indeed a marketplace.

Moreover, in the constant construction and reconstruction of the managerial self, it is almost as if there is an 'incompleteness'. The managerial identities revealed in participants' talk are often ones whereby "the organisation has become part of the managers' subjectivity, and the self of the manager absorbed into the organisation" (Harding, 2003: 209). In these discursive constructions, despite the dichotomous presentation of our findings into 'individual' and 'organisational' actors, any boundaries between the individual level of actor and the organisational level have largely disappeared.

Our interpretations concur to a considerable degree with the findings of Haytko (2004), who argues that her participants' conceptualisations of IORs define them as some combination of the individual personal relations that exist across firms. We therefore share a focus not just on "the macro (abstract) level" of organisational relations but also on "the micro (concrete) level" of personal relationships between "the actors involved in managing the inter-organisational exchange" (2004: 317). We believe that the linguistic construction of these actors, and the degree to which boundaries are perceived to exist between them, can play a significant role in the reproduction and transformation – or structuring and heterogenising in Håkansson's (1992) terms - of industrial networks. This is because we see participants' network theories (Håkansson and Johanson, 1993) made manifest in manager's talk as forming a basis for action, and hence possessing a performative, or productive, capacity.

Contribution

By providing a detailed account of the discursive strategies deployed by managers responsible for marketing and purchasing to make sense of their boundary-spanning work, we have shed new light on how IORs are experienced and produced by the actors involved. The study shows the value of taking a discursive approach to researching identity constructions and boundary-setting practices in industrial networks. By discerning different boundary-setting strategies in the talk of IOR actors we can better understand how managers attempt to make sense of the cross-boundary relationship, and of themselves and the 'other' in that relation.

We have illustrated how organisational boundaries operate to divide and connect at the same time, such that any entity thus 'formed' is only partial, and constantly looking for further connections that will change its identity (cf. Cooper, 1986). In trying to determine where the individual actor 'ends' and the organisation 'begins', we see that such distinctions are often blurred in participants' accounts. Boundaries

constructed beyond those that enclose individuals serve to perform an array of discursive functions: they position individual network participants as either 'in or out' of an organisation; and focal firms and other organisational actors as either 'in or out' of a relationship, a supply chain, or a market. Moreover, these boundaries can shift, and can become permeable or solidify, depending on the speaker's perspective.

In this way, we have offered some illuminating explanations of how managers accomplish social order in their language use, however temporary that order may be. There is still much to understand in this discursive arena, but our paper represents a challenging step into a territory where IMP researchers, like management scholars in general, "haven't yet gone far enough with language" (Westwood and Linstead, 2001: 344).

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