Subjection mechanisms in organizational discourses

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This work aims to initiate an investigation about the relations permeating the Epidemiology of Representations, the Relevance Theory and the dissemination of organizational discourses. Taking point from Dan Sperber's assumption that an idea gets its power of dissemination from the attractiveness within it, we try to analyze the concurrent dissemination of organizational discourses that, at first evaluation, have not enough attractiveness to be disseminated by the work force. The central question arises from the fact that organizational discourses are frequently of limited interpretation and seeking for subjection and control of the worker that, nonetheless, still works for the spreading of said discourses. Thus, the hypothesis proposes the organizational discourse as a carrier of alternative relevance: the relevance of maintaining the job – for instance – forcing the self-realization as a marginal thought or desire for the worker. In this mind-frame, the subjection can be thought from a cognitive perspective, and the employee could be seen as a thinking being, as a chooser; he thinks, take risks, weights decisions and actions, aiming for the maintenance or alteration of his social status in the group.

1. Introduction

It's a general perception that dreams and happiness can be somehow derived or achieved through work and professional commitment. However, as much as the conquest of subjectivity is frequently associated with professional conquests, it is also common to criticize the organizational environment for trying to shape individual behaviours (subjection) as a communication strategy.

In Brazil's media, two cases of late about human communication in organizational settings seems to be of note; in the first one, Felipe Milanez, an National Geographic's editor and journalist, was fired from his job because he dared to speak and write against one of the other magazines of the same group (Revista Veja - a kind of news and opinion vehicle in Brazil). In the second case, no professional was fired, but it got some international attention: Felipe Massa, Ferrari's Formula One pilot, was subtly ordered to let his team companion, Fernando Alonso, pass by him, taking the lead. Considering that the radio communication between team and pilot is open to the audience, the discursive act of the Italian constructor went live on air in television transmission. The images made clear the moment that Massa let Alonso drive through. In both cases the media debate circles around an specific theme: subjection. On the one hand, debaters seems to feel indignant about the public actions and assertions made by the organizations. On the other hand, defenders of the "taking one for the team" argue that employees are paid to act for the good of the enterprise, in aid of the employer. In common, both sides forget to consider that there were people, thinking individuals, behind the actions of Massa and Milanez.

Most of the outrage that moved hundreds of people to express themselves in social networks and electronic media seems to have in itself a note of disgust, a kind of nausea provoked by the systematic ignorance of the employee's subjectivity in both cases. As a matter of fact, even Titonio Massa - Felipe Massa's father - felt the urge of speaking about the occurrence, making the point that his son had no option but to adopt the behaviour expected by Ferrari. His words were reproduced through loads of media vehicles. The following words were published by the electronic iteration of Folha de Sao Paulo, one of the biggest newspapers in Brazil:

The only possible comment to the episode is: it is regrettable. Ferrari's position about the incident is regrettable. It was made clear that Massa let Alonso pass by. Massa respected the team's order, his employer. As a good employee, he had to obey his employer. There is a hierarchy, and because of this Massa was to comply. He did it because of his character, and for the loyalty he has for Ferrari.1

Massa and Milanez were considered as victims of subjection not only by the critics of the organizational actions, but by the defendants as well. Even the ones who took sides with the employers saw a passive position of Massa and Milanez in both cases. Portal da Imprensa, a news and opinion portal site in Brazil, published some words attributed to Milanez and his former employer. The fired journalist explains that his comments - the ones that triggered his discharge

and were only published at first in a social network - were just the opinions of an individual, and not the official words of an employee:

“I was very harsh, I truly made some harsh comments, but as a common person. I took it personally [about the report]. But I am upset with the way they fired me. Some loose words on Twitter had the power of finishing a lot of promising projects I had.”

The editor-in-chief of National Geographic, in his turn, points to the fact that Milanez had no right to express his subjectivity, considering his condition of an employee:

“Matthew Shirts, editor editor-in-chief of National Geographic, has confirmed that Milanez was fired due to the comments on Twitter. “He was fired due to his harsh critics concerning the magazine. Abril Group pays his wage and came to this decision”, he said. Questioned about his agreement concerning the discharge, Shirts said that “did what he was supposed to do exercising the editor-in-chief role”.

Both sides agree that organizational communication has determined the behaviours of individuals and organizations. It is an acceptable point that, at times, organizational discourses present some manipulative characteristics, but we reject the idea that no specific psychological events take part in the behaviour displayed by the employees who would be, in such conception, "just following orders".

The idea that workers are not individuals seems to be accepted by and echoed in traditional approaches concerning the socio-cultural behaviour of humans. Such approaches tend to focus the analysis in the resultant structures of human behaviour, rejecting the role of cognitive process in the creation and dissemination of cultural artefacts. Organizational communications is comprehended as a fact of social life, imposed to individuals who share the mentioned artefacts. Among the scientific disciplines dedicated to promotion of such vision are: the classic theory of communication, the Behaviourism, Structuralist Anthropology, Discourse Analysis, not mentioning others less known disciplines and theories. The mentioned disciplines, in a general way, consider that social life determines individual actions, neglecting the cognitive apparatus involved on decision-making. Referring to Steven Pinker, psycholinguist, the doctrines in question see the human mind as blank slate.

Putting aside the deterministic approach, we choose do adopt the probabilistic approach instead, offered by Relevance Theory (RT, from now on) and by the Epidemiology of Representations (ER). Both theories seems to offer a more plausible alternative to the issue of subjection in organizational discourses. Following the view we propose in this work, "subjection" should not be understood as a simple response triggered by the environment. We rather consider subjection as a result of individual calculations, based on risk analysis and careful consideration by the worker of the consequences of specific behaviours in workplace or working situations. The fundamental hypothesis posits the individual risk analysis against the challenges imposed by organizational communication, making space for subjection as a strategy adopted by workers aiming for job maintenance and the relative (amplification of) status provided in a stable professional position. Something we call "an intuitive status psychology".


In the 20th century, we saw a lot of academic disciplines falling for the trap of excluding psychological phenomena from the understanding of human cultural facts. There was the time of structuralism, reigning not only in academic circles but in common life as well. The mind was considered inaccessible as an object of empiric investigation, and similar misconceptions made linguists turn their heads to linguistic structures; anthropologists turned to cultural structures and psychologists aimed for empirically explicit manifestations of human behaviour. We see the negation of psychology as a biological reality constituting an effort to demonstrate that intention, emotion and personality could not be anything more than a fantasy. Creativity, so typical of human species, would not be causally originated in the individual, but in society instead. Language, culture and behaviour were considered a kind of automatic response to the social world, in a sequence of causal events between different environments. However, two reactions of note came in the year of 1957: the first one was crafted by Noam Chomsky, through his "Syntactic Structures, claiming for a generative mental organ for language. The second one was proposed by Paul Grice, arguing in favo of a conversational philosophy which saw the experience of conversation as an innate category of world representation.


3 See footnote 2.

4 Pinker (2002) proceeds to analyse the implications of negating human nature in science and as a cultural fact in modern society. We, the authors, share this conception and consider that the negation contributes to erroneous visions in the sciences having human behaviour as an object of study. More than this, it brings to discussion the conception that human beings carry innate biological adaptations, designed by evolution as mechanisms to deal with complex cultural behaviours.

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Chomsky's generativism and Grice's pragmatics are influential theories for RT and ER, that we described before as fundamental in this work, and both theories were developed by Dan Sperber. Relevance Theory, made in partnership with the linguist Deirdre Wilson, proposes an alternative to the classic model of communication, focused on code. Sperber and Wilson say that the role of a human communication theory should be of describing the innate psychological mechanisms involved in production and interpretation of communicative acts. In other words, besides opposing the traditional code/decode model, Sperber and Wilson also oppose the analytical model of cultural productions in our species, so common in structuralists approaches. Concerning the Epidemiology of Representations, we are talking of an anthropological and also anti-analytic theory, described in terms of an generative system of culture and involving psychological mechanisms in creation, discrimination and stabilization of cultural facts. We consider the approach of Sperber and Wilson as something very adequate in our work, since it sheds light on psychological phenomena responsible for the intrinsic idiosyncrasy that is fundamental component in cultural interpretation produced by human beings.

2.1. Relevance and innate cognitive mechanisms in human communication

Both Grice and Chomsky have developed theories that impacted on TR's formulation, but Sperber and Wilson disagree of some central affirmations of those authors. Discordances became explicit when we talk about the naturalistic model of human cognition embedded in RT and ER, the so-called massive modularity. The thesis comes from Evolutionary Psychology and considers that specific behaviours of specific species came to be as adaptations selected through evolutionary pressure. Mind, in this conception, can be considered as a group of adaptations which process environmental information, in such a way that it brings more advantageous interpretations of reality to the individual survivability. The mental modularity authorizes the human beings to occupy the cultural niche of our geological era (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Speaking of environmental information processing, Sperber (1996a, p. 114) makes the following affirmation:

Deirdre Wilson and I have argued that the effect-effort balance in the processing of any piece of information determines its degree of relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). We claim that human cognitive processes are geared to the maximization of relevance. Most factors of relevance are highly idiosyncratic, and have to do with the individual's unique location in time and space. Some facts of relevance, however, are rooted in genetically determined aspects of human psychology. Thus, the processing of stimuli for which exists a specialized module requires comparatively less effort and is potentially more relevant.

We can take that any mention to mental modularity points to Jerry Fodor (1984), but the massive modularity conception differs from the model proposed by Fodor, mainly in what concerns the role of natural selection as a shaper of innate psychological mechanisms. It becomes explicit in this new approach that Fodor has put in place a theory only partly modular, in which only the perception can be considered truly modular. Sperber brings to attention that the title of Fodor's work, "Modularity of Mind" is somewhat paradoxical, and has nothing to do with the exposed model, since "In its centre and bulk, Fodor’s mind is decidedly non-modular" (Sperber, 1996b, p. 19). This issue comes to be central in the discussion; the generative notion of competence is amplified in Relevance Theory. Sperber and Wilson consider that an mental organ (module) specific to language processing, must provide not only recognizing and generating ability for utterances and sentences, but also should provide communicational contents and the consequent interpretation.

As much as TR could be considered a theory occupied with hearer's cognition, there is also space for the comprehension that both hearer and speaker engage themselves in achieving success with their respective communicative intentions: from the speaker's side, success consists in make adequate communication of an specific content to an specific audience; from the hearer's side, success consists in searching of adequate interpretations of contents communicated, considering the relevance as a guide in interpretation. Maximization of relevance expectations is a two-way road, in which interaction comes from cognitive abilities presented by hearer and speaker: none has dominance over the other. Besides, we are constantly surrounded by relevant stimuli. This means that we live in an environment in which ideas and representations tend to compete for the attention of individuals.

Despite some considerations of Sperber and Wilson's cognitive pragmatics as a radical kind of relativism, we should consider that a successful cognitive actuation concerning language is achieved through an adequate interpretation of reality, a notion that strays from the conception that all meaning can be found in individual's minds. TR's approach indicates that communication made through language use doesn't occur by decoding a previously coded message, but it happens because human beings are cognitively "hard-wired" to search for the best and most efficacious manners to expressing and interpreting the world. In Sperber and Wilson words (1995, p. 38):

All humans live in the same physical world. We are all engaged in a lifetime’s enterprise of deriving information from this common environment and constructing the best possible mental representation of it. We do not all construct the same representation, because differences in our narrower physical environments on the one hand, and in our cognitive abilities on the other. Perceptual abilities vary in effectiveness from one individual to another. Inferential abilities also vary, and not just in effectiveness. People speak different languages, they have mastered different concepts; as a result, they can construct different representations and make different inferences. […] Hence, even if they all
shared the same narrow physical environment, what we propose to call their ‘cognitive environment’ would still differ.

The citation suggests that principles coordinating logical operations concerning world representations do vary, not only because there are individual perceptual differences, but also because concepts habiting individual minds tend to differ as well. Idiosyncrasy comes from innate mechanisms, that vary in efficacy and related to previous representations which serve as principles in processing logical and causal relations expressed in communicative contents. Separated individuals will comprehend in a different manner the same event not because the meaning of the event is restricted do individual minds; this happens due to differences in world knowledge and cultural background, interfering in a direct way with the relevance attribution process.

The acceptance of such concepts in no way means that there is no material and palpable reality. It only means that we do not let go of previous experiences when making interpretations of new information and constructing knowledge. This somehow implies that human communication should not be restricted only to empirically observable phenomena; information originated from the cognitive system itself (memories, desires and intentions, examples of what Fodor considers as a result of unsystematic and non-modular activity of mind) can be potentially relevant.

Arguing about the general character of RT as a communication theory, Sperber & Wilson (2005, p. 223) show that the correlation between creative forces in human mind and relevance take place in the fact that not only ostensive stimuli produces relevance expectations:

> [...] what kind of things can be relevant? Intuitively, relevance is a potential propriety not only of utterances and other observable phenomena, but also of memories, thinking and inferential conclusions. In terms of Relevance Theory, any external stimuli or internal representation which provides an input to cognitive processes can be relevant to a individual in some definite moment.

Considering that RT is a modular approach of human cognition, and that communication is a result of interaction between individuals who provide intention for communicative and interpretative behaviours and, we will now focus in central aspects of Epidemiology of Representations.

### 2.2. Cognitive factors involved in representations dissemination

The memetic approach, developed by evolutionist philosopher Richard Dawkins (1976) is the most prestigious model of cultural spread. Dawkins considers cultural facts as replicative entities, and the concept of meme is analogous to gene. The genetic metaphor to cultural spreading proposed by Dawkins is just one of various deterministic models for comprehending the fact that world representations are susceptible to spreading. Like Richerson and Boyd (1998), Dawkins seems to consider cultural transmission processes as imitation processes, in which cognitive mechanisms do exist, but are generally considered unnecessary to an adequate thesis and explanation. As a result, world representations must be subjected to selection processes. As a general consideration, the memetic approach can satisfactorily explain why different people, inhabiting different places on the planet, believe in different things concerning the world like, as an example, the fact that Hindi persons believe in Buddha's divine existence, Palestinians believe in Allah and Brazilian people believe in Jesus Christ. However, the gaps in memetic theory become evident through the fact that it cannot explain why Dawkins, living in a religious country, do not believe in a divine creator.

The religious discourse is considered by Dawkins, behaviourists and discourse analysts as a determinant of mental representations concerning the world's creation, shared by individuals in a specific society. This implies that previous knowledge, intentions, memories, emotions and intuitions do not occupy space in models of dissemination of representations.

Public and mental contents are, if not identical, almost similar. Henrich and Boyd (1998), as an example, argue that deterministic selection of ideas is responsible for a fundamental characteristic in our social lives: the conformist behaviour. The authors try to show that the idiosyncrasies composing mental processes do not have an important role because, after all, individuals do not interfere with the cultural manifestation, considered to be only an imitation.

To better understand the issue, we can refer to imitation in arts, like musical impersonators do. Should we consider that information and contents on the mind of an Elvis Presley impersonator do not interfere with his performing and entertaining behaviour on stage? More clearly, is it possible to neglect intuitions, intentions, desires and all of other idiosyncrasies that inhabit the mind of people who learn patterns and live like their idols on stage? We consider it an explicit issue: not only mental impulses are decisive for imitation, but also must be considered as decisive factors to the spreading of such behaviour.

We agree with Sperber who, in RT's elaboration, considered that selection isn't the more suitable term for cultural dissemination; instead, cultural facts are more well described as attractors of cognitive attention. The level of attractiveness in a cultural element makes individuals became attracted to a public representation, and also be compelled to spread new modified versions of said representation.

Inferential capacity is crucial in the cultural ability of communication and should not be left aside. Origgi and Sperber (2000, p.150) explain:

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5 We made the translation.
Most current discussions of the evolution of language give little or no place to pragmatics, and explicitly or tacitly accept the code model of linguistic communication. Human languages are seen, precisely, as a rich kind of code that allows for the encoding and decoding of any communicable thought. [...] A perfect code is one without ambiguity. [...] Simple perfect codes are common in animal communication. [...] Human languages are obvious not perfect codes. Typical sentences contain multiple ambiguities.

Dawkins is as researcher that demonstrate little concern with concepts developed in Pragmatics and by the human ability of complex data inference. As an example, the detection of a lie perfectly demonstrates that contents in a cultural linguistic unity (the communicative manifestation) is not a mere replication of contents. Hearsers have intentions just like their interlocutors, and also have the ability of inferring if an utterance can be considered a cheating attempt. This fact suggests that hearers try to recreate the communicative intentions of the speaker. This does not happen motivated by some kind of “benevolence” or “charity” in the hearer, but because both interlocutors want to benefit from conclusions and interpretations possible due to communicational events. Cosmides and Tooby (2008; Cosmides, Tooby, Fiddick, & Bryant, 2005; Ermer, Cosmides & Tooby, 2007; Ermer, Guerin, Cosmides, Tooby, & Miller, 2006; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990) and collaborators demonstrated that cheating detection is an important genetic feature (an innate one) of human cognition. When a hearer detects a linguistic cheat he’s not simply recreating an expressed content on speaker’s side, but inferring the best conclusion about the fact as well. In other words, the hearer is creating a new representation to the expressed content. In the same way that hearers intend to obtain relevant interpretation of utterances presented, the intentionality will also be intrinsic in the dissemination process, when the hearer turns to speaker. A common occurrence is humour: when we listen to a joke and find it funny, we will try to tell the same joke to other people; but, if we find the joke infamous, we hardly will make the effort of repeating it to friends and acquaintances (unless, of course, if we are intentionally trying to be infamous ourselves). In none of those situations, judging the joke funny or infamous, we will be acting as mere repeaters.

When developing the ER, Sperber showed that a representation must have in a mandatory way three inherent components: a representation is something which represents something to someone. The author demonstrated that there is a paradox in the supposed naturalism which says that only the empirical manifestation should be taken in consideration for a scientific approach. After all, if society causes culture, what really causes culture. If psychological events are not considered part of cultural causation, then we will be doing a kind of semi-naturalism, accepting, at least for culture, the existence of disconnected causality events. Sperber sees only one naturalistic alternative to human culture, and the alternative explicitly includes cognitive phenomena, like material events:

The materialist alternative is to assume that both mental and public representations are strictly material objects, and to take the implications of this assumption seriously. Cognitive systems such as brain construct internal representations of their environment partly on the basis of physical interaction with that environment. Because these interactions, mental representations are, to some extent, regularly connected to what they represent; as a result, they have semantic properties, or ‘meaning’, of their own (see Dretske 1981; Fodor 1987b; Millikan 1984). Public representations, on the other hand, are connected to what they represent only through the meaning attributed to them by their producers or their users; they have no semantic properties of their own. In other words, public representations have meaning only through being associated with mental representations. Public representations, on the other hand, are connected to what they represent only through the meaning attributed to them by their producers or their users; they have no semantic properties of their own. In other words, public representations have meaning only through being associated with mental representations.

It should be noticed that social representations only take form and meaning when associated with mental representations of individuals. This fact confers the creative and idiosyncratic characteristics of communication; and the same characteristics seems to be toned down in organizational communication, especially in communications that try to direct the worker’s behaviour from a hierarchical perspective.

3. The trap of organizational discourse: free of mind is not free of action

The contemporary vision on social sciences tend to see organizational discourse through a moral filter (Butler, 1997), that would define the application of subjecting discourses as an intrinsically bad action (Elsbach, 2006), subjecting the worker to the discursive force (Flores, 2008), shaping behaviours and triggering attitudes that the worker would not show otherwise, if let to his own desires (Epstein & Staw, 2000). In this work, we share the same opinions, recognizing that there is a political and cultural dimension cutting through work relations. However, we intend to bring to the front line again the role of the worker in his own subjection, delivering the individual perspective in the subjection process. We judge modern work relations as something undesirable not only in a moral or social way, but also as incoherent in a organic or evolutionary level, since those relations put themselves against survival expectations in human species.

It was previously investigated in Mazuroski Jr. (2009, p. 77) the way that organizational discourses can be composed aiming for control of workers, making use of (at least) twenty-four linguistic, psychological and discursive
strategies in promoting subjection. Such strategies can present themselves in things like using jargon or opaque text, perceptual distortion in work environment, using power in discourse construction and utterance, underestimation/overestimation of risks, illusion of control, use of coercion and submission, between other strategies. Strategies can be stacked, in an attempt to make them more powerful and efficacious. It can be said that the more strategies you find in a discourse, the more it has of control and subjection.

We can identify the contraposition of two different dimensions then: corporate discourse investigation points to a control and subjection prevalence in work relations (Mazuroski Jr., 2009), while RT and ER demonstrate that communication has an indispensable share of individuality in representations construction, giving meaning to the world and acting in this world in an adequate way. The battle between institutional control and the individual expression urge will naturally establish a conflict in the worker, when confronting the institutional attempt of erasure of his individuality and subjectivity. The conflict becomes explicit in Massa's and Milanez's cases, who were cited in this work. Both workers, due to their public and personal acknowledgement, cannot be considered as _subjected or ignorant about their own condition_. There is suffering and public commotion in both cases, since Massa and Martines recognize ahead the consequences of subjecting (in Massa's case) or not subjecting (Milanez) to the organizational discourse. There is freedom to think and enough knowledge about one's own condition. But there is no freedom of _action_.

How to deal with an organizational discourse, with a work culture, generated and maintained by ourselves, that make us a subjected workforce? We propose the cognitive sciences as a guiding light on this issue:

Economic and organizational behaviors do not flow from disembodied principles, but are the computed outputs of structured cognitive mechanisms incarnated in brain organization. So, cognitive science is one foundation needed to understand human economic and organizational decision-making (Tooby, Cosmides & Price, 2006, p. 104).

There are principles that guide the emergence and maintenance of economical and organizational behaviours. The investigation necessarily will consider the worker as a constructor and spreader of the same discourses that turn against himself. In such a conception, the way to comprehension of the dissemination of organizational discourses seems to cross two different investigative levels, both adapted by us (from a cognitive point of view) from Henrich & Boyd (1998, p. 216): I – In a cultural evolutionary level, we aim to discover how values and creeds are transmitted between people, and why the process of transmission generates and maintain group and organizational differences. II – In a genetic evolutionary level, we search for conditions under which natural selection could favour the psychological mechanisms that explain the cultural evolution of organized groups.

To the comprehension of I, we postulate RT and ER as consistent theoretical bases guiding to the understanding of organizational discourses maintenance, searching for the essential attractor in said discourses, the factors that stimulate and maintain the discourse circulation among workers and its repetition, internalization and coaction between work colleagues. What is the thing in a organizational discourse that seduces the worker? In which ways the organization succeeds in turning itself in a _church or family_. Such facts make a dimension for analysis. The comprehension of II asks that we use the Evolutionary Psychology to clarify genetic mechanisms stimulating the individual to put the organization in first place, letting his own needs and desires as a second thought. The consideration of this scientific approach naturally brings to surface the hypothesis that the worker is not simply subjected to discourses. He agrees with and spreads the discourse, diminishes himself in the group, because the specific behaviour satisfies an instinct or need, coming from a genetically defined basis. The need in focus, selected by evolutionary factors, can be drawn from a simple gathering instinct (to gather money for difficult times, even if the worker must submit to humiliation or long duty times) until a submission instinct as a way of maintaining the place in the group (the group protects the weak, who would not survive alone).

4. Conclusions

We believe that such ways of academic exploration may reinforce the role of Linguistics and Psychology in organizational studies, and establish a solid bridge of said disciplines with cognitive sciences. The focus is on communicative human beings (and not focusing in discourse or organization), bringing to the spotlight the role of persons in construction of cultural artefacts, empowering the worker and making visible the roads to change working relations. The perspective considers the individual creative character as an intrinsic feature of all human beings. We do not ignore the strong appeal to behaviour shaping present in organizational discourses. But we do expect to question the value of such strategies, since cognitive sciences already demonstrated that subjection will inevitably generate conflicts in mental and public spheres.

We intend to collaborate with theoretical agenda of cognitive sciences and, more than this, to make a contribution to the discussion concerning creativity as a individual manifestation in the organizational collaborative environment. We understand that both issues are worth of notice in modern times. Both RT and ER are clear examples of theoretical approaches that made notable progression towards the understanding of the psychological organization in human species, and the organizational discourses are full of unsatisfactory in times where creativity and individualization are trademarks in work services. Since work is a individual crucial sphere, we consider this as an important debate not only to sciences, but mainly to organizations who, after all, make use of individuals to reach collective objectives and goals.
References


