A critical reflection of current trends in discourse analytical research on leadership across disciplines. A call for a more engaging dialogue

Abstract

This paper takes the frequently lamented state of current leadership research in business and organisational sciences as a starting point and argues for a more open and engaging dialogue with leadership researchers in applied linguistics and pragmatics. Focusing on current debates around terminological issues and methodological questions that are particularly prominent in critical leadership studies, we show that research in applied linguistics and pragmatics has the potential to make important contributions by providing the analytical tools and processes to support critical leadership researchers in their quest to challenge hegemonic notions of leadership by moving beyond simplistic and often problematic leader-follower dichotomies and by providing empirical evidence to capture leadership in situ thereby feeding into current theorisations of leadership.

Keywords: leadership discourse, applied linguistics, pragmatics, critical leadership, leader-follower dichotomies, challenging hegemonic notions of leadership

Introduction

In a relatively recent editorial in this journal, Dennis Tourish (2015: 137) expressed his concern over the current state of leadership research and lamented that, “[r]esearchers seem content to ask smaller and smaller questions about fewer and fewer issues of genuine
significance, producing statements of the blindingly obvious, the completely irrelevant or the palpably absurd.” Remarks like this show that those involved in leadership research are desperately looking for new approaches, new ideas, new questions, as well as new answers to old questions. This is particularly true in critical leadership studies, where researchers aim to “challenge hegemonic perspectives [...] that tend both to underestimate the complexity of leadership dynamics and to take for granted that leaders are the people in charge who make decisions, and that followers are those who merely carry out orders from ‘above’” (Collinson, 2011: 181).

We believe that many of the conceptual and methodological issues currently being grappled with in this strand of leadership research – including debates around terminologies (e.g. Learmonth & Morrell, 2017; Collinson, 2017) and calls for more detailed explorations of “the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 53) – would benefit from a more systematic and open engagement with leadership research currently conducted within the fields of applied linguistics and pragmatics. Looking beyond disciplinary boundaries and venturing into largely ignored areas of inquiry has much to offer to critical leadership studies, and, thus, fresh air may be brought into ongoing debates. In this paper, we aim to outline some of the benefits and concrete areas of potential cross-fertilisation between these, at the moment, rather separate areas of inquiries. Our particular focus will be one specific area that has been repeatedly identified for its potential to bring much needed fresh air to current leadership research, and where this cross-fertilisation promises to be particularly fruitful, namely discourse analytical approaches to leadership.

Discourse analytical approaches to leadership
Following the “linguistic turn” in social sciences (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Whittle et al., 2015), over the past decade there has been a growing interest in the topic of leadership from a discourse analytical perspective. In particular, since Fairhurst’s (2007) seminal work on discursive leadership, research adopting a discourse analytical approach to leadership has gained momentum – both within business and organisational studies (e.g. Crevani et al., 2010; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010), as well as in applied linguistics and pragmatics (e.g. Baxter, 2010; Holmes, 2007; Schnurr, 2009a, b; Clifton, 2012), and other disciplines.

Acknowledging the central role of discourse for leadership, discursive leadership is interested in understanding how leadership is done in and through discourse. Research in this tradition mainly conducts qualitative case studies (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Whittle et al., 2015; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013), and draws on some of the tools and methods developed by discourse analytic approaches (such as Conversation Analysis (e.g. Clifton, 2006; Svennevig, 2008; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013) and Interactional Sociolinguistics (e.g. Schnurr, 2009b; Vine et al., 2008)). This research largely focuses on analysing the specific discursive processes through which leadership is accomplished at the micro-level of interaction – with the aim of gaining “a better understanding of the everyday practices of talk that constitute leadership and a deeper knowledge of how leaders use language to craft ‘reality’, construct meaning and contribute to sense-making” (Clifton, 2006: 203; see also Whittle et al., 2015; Svenningson and Larsson, 2006). Hence, discursive leadership, in contrast to much other research on leadership (which often falls under the umbrella of leadership psychology (see also Chen, 2008)), does not attempt “to capture the experience of leadership by forming and statistically analysing a host of cognitive, affective, and conative variables and their casual connections” (Fairhurst, 2007: 15). Instead, discursive leadership research focuses on lived rather than reported experience – thus often taking a constructivist approach (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2012).
In summarising the current state-of-the-art of discursive leadership research in business and organisational studies, Larsson (2016: 174) identifies three broad strands of inquiry: “How a designated leader enacts his or her role; how identities relevant to the leadership process are constructed in interaction; and what influence and organizing processes exist in interaction.” Research in applied linguistics and pragmatics focuses on similar topics, albeit with a particular interest in identifying and describing the specific discursive practices through which leadership is accomplished on the micro-level of an interaction, and how the various processes to do with influencing and organising are enacted throughout an interaction. Studies within the latter field of inquiry have, for example, analysed how leadership is enacted in and through getting things done and assigning tasks to others (e.g. Schnurr and Mak, 2011; Svennevig, 2008; Darics, 2017; Skovolt, 2015), solving disagreements and conflict (e.g. Walker and Aritz, 2014; Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Holmes and Marra, 2004; Saito, 2011), building consensus (Wodak et al., 2011), managing meetings (e.g. Holmes, 2000; Clifton, 2012; Walker and Aritz, 2014) and acting as chair (e.g. Ford, 2008), decision-making (e.g. Marra et al., 2006), as well as sense-making (Clifton, 2006), gate-keeping (van de Mieroop and Schnurr, 2014), mentoring (Holmes, 2005), and creating a positive working atmosphere in a team (e.g. Schnurr, 2009b; Darics, 2017).

Discursive leadership research in both business and organisational studies, as well as applied linguistics and pragmatics, is characterised by a strong focus on empirical data – often in the form of audio- and/or video-recordings of interactions. Research conducted in these disciplines also shares an interest in understanding how leadership is actually done, and – in contrast to much of the earlier mainstream leadership research – rejects attempts to establish “grand theories of leadership” (Clifton, 2006; Alvesson, 1996). However, in spite of these shared interests and considerable overlaps, there is currently very little engagement between scholars in these disciplines. On the contrary, there are only a very few attempts by
those working within the (conceptual and methodological) constraints of one discipline to critically engage with the work done in the other (see also Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Crevani et al., 2010). This paper aims to address this dilemma and calls for a more engaging, open, and systematic exchange of ideas and practices between these disciplines. We argue that such an undertaking is particularly valuable for critical leadership studies as it speaks directly to their aim “to denaturalize leadership by showing it to be the outcome of an ongoing process of social construction and negotiation” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 43). In what follows, we spell out what concrete contributions research in applied linguistics and pragmatics can make to critical leadership studies by i) contributing to recent debates around leadership terminologies, and ii) providing alternative methodological approaches which may help address the current lack of empirical evidence needed to support and underpin theoretical assumptions and claims. We discuss each of these points in turn.

**Recent debates around leadership terminologies**

Although leadership has always been a hotly debated topic (Bass, 1981), the discussions around what is (not) leadership and which terminologies best capture the closely related issues of power and agency have recently gained momentum (e.g. Kelly, 2008, 2014; Learmonth & Morrell, 2017; Collinson, 2017), and are central to critical leadership studies which call for a “re-think[ing of] these dynamics in much more detail and in much more critical and dialectical ways” (Collinson, 2017: 279). In a recent paper in this journal, Learmonth and Morrell (2017: 262, 265) lament a generally “unreflexive use of [the terms] leader and follower” which largely impedes on or even prevents a genuinely “radical critical analysis” of the power dynamics and agency relationships in today’s organisations. In a response to this, Collinson (2017: 279) emphasises the importance of problematising these
categories “in ways that render transparent the possible tensions, conflicts, ambiguities, contradictions as well as structural antagonisms in leader-follower dynamics, power relations and identities”.

These debates make important contributions to current scholarship that criticises person-centred views in favour of conceptualisations of leadership as co-produced and located in relations and interactions (e.g. Collinson, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Ospina & Sorenson, 2007). Rather than focusing on individuals, recent research increasingly distances itself from viewing leadership as intricately tied to specific persons or positions, and questions and challenges notions of heroic leadership (e.g. Mehra et al., 2006; Thorpe et al., 2011). As a consequence, these studies tend to focus on the processes of leadership and investigate how leadership (in the plural) is shared among the members of a particular group rather than how it might be reflected in the behaviours of an individual in a particular position (e.g. Gronn, 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003; Crevani et al., 2010; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013; Choi & Schnurr, 2014; Clifton, 2017).

Although the conceptual and theoretical debates around these issues seem to be currently more advanced in the business and organisational sciences literature (e.g. Crevani et al., 2010; Kort, 2008; Jones, 2014), we believe that research in applied linguistics and pragmatics can make important contributions to these discussions – in particular, by providing analytical tools and processes to identify and describe leadership practices in situ, thereby generating empirical evidence to feed into these debates. We have selected two examples from naturally occurring interactions (that were audio-recorded during meetings at different organisations) to illustrate some of the insights that can be generated through such an analysis. In line with research that challenges person-centred views of leadership, the first example illustrates how leadership is shared and co-produced among various participants, and it identifies and
describes some of the (discursive) processes through which this is accomplished – thereby providing empirical support for currently largely theoretical debates.

Example 1 (from Clifton, 2012; simplified transcription conventions)

Context: During a monthly staff meeting at a European office of a British cultural organisation. The meeting was recorded on the eve of the US-led invasion in Iraq. Andy, the director, is chairing the meeting; Chris is the project’s officer; Debbie is the information and communications manager, and Betty the assistant director. The 14 other participants do not contribute to the discussion below. Participants are discussing whether they should be screening a film called Gas Attack at the opening night of an upcoming film festival.

1 Chris: Er one thing I need t- to get a bit
2 get everyone’s opinion for the opening + gala night +
3 one for the core film festival itself on the twenty-first of March
4 er great Scottish film called Gas Attack
5 which talks about chemical weapons in Iraq and
6 asylum seeker dispersal programmes //in the UK\)
7 Debbie: /We tried it\ last year but //didn’t\
8 Chris: /Hhh\ so extremely hot topic
9 (0.5)
10 Chris: But
11 Andy: //On the twenty-first?\)
12 Betty: /I think\ I think we may need to run that one past + //er\)
13 Chris: /We\ might need t- to run it past //a few people first\)
Right from the beginning of the excerpt, it is noteworthy that the leadership in this team is distributed among team members, and that it is not necessarily the most senior person and official chair (i.e. Andy) who takes on a leadership role. On the contrary, at this point in the meeting it is Chris, the project’s officer, who introduces a new topic and invites contributions from the other team members on whether they should screen a potentially controversial movie at the opening night of the upcoming gala. Although Chris is not the chair or officially designated “leader” of the team, he takes on a leadership role here, and by explicitly asking for “everyone’s opinion” (line 2), he right from the start sets up the decision-making about this particular issue as a shared activity. However, he does so in a way that enables him to still maintain the ownership of the decision (as reflected, for example, in his choice of the first person singular pronoun “I” (line 1)). So, at this point in the discussion, Chris is clearly the one in charge: he brings up a new topic to be discussed at this point in the meeting (i.e. whether to screen *Gas Attack*), he holds the floor for a comparatively long time (e.g. as reflected in the number of words that he utters compared to the subsequent contributions), and he invites others to express their opinions. If we view leadership as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005; Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and as an exercise of influence (Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), based on this evidence we could say that Chris here claims a leadership role by positioning himself as being responsible for this particular issue. This interpretation is further supported in the next two lines where he overlaps with Betty (lines 7 and 8), thereby preventing her from finishing her turn in speaking, in which she refers to another (presumably related) incident that
happened in the previous year (note her use of the inclusive first person plural pronoun “we” here, emphasising collective responsibility).

Chris’ interruption is followed by a short silence (0.5 seconds in line 10), after which he begins to start a new utterance (“But” in line 10), which gets interrupted by Andy who asks a clarifying question about the date of the planned screening (line 11). Interestingly, this question is not picked up by any of the participants – in spite of the fact that Andy is the most senior person on the team – and instead Betty, who initially overlaps with Andy’s question, gains the floor again (line 12) and actively contributes to the discussion by reminding people that this kind of decision will need the approval of others, who at this point in the discussion remain unspecified. Chris seems to agree with her point, as he picks it up and repeats it (still without specifying who exactly they will have “to run it past” (line 13)). It could be argued that, by picking up Betty’s initial suggestion, Chris agrees with, and also legitimises and ratifies it. However, as we can see in the last line of the transcript, Betty, by overlapping with Chris, repeats her suggestion and actually moves the discussion forward by providing further information (“from headquarters” (line 15)), which the earlier contributions were lacking. In this respect, Betty takes a very active role in the discussion, which extends beyond traditional views of passive followers: not only does she make the most important contribution which eventually moves the discussion forward, but she is also the one to outline future actions, which are eventually implemented by the team. The same can be said about Chris, who clearly takes on a leadership role in this discussion, as outlined above.

These observations challenge static leader-follower dichotomies and, instead, convincingly illustrate that, in this team, leadership is a distributed activity based on team members’ expertise rather than hierarchical standing within the organisation. This relatively short excerpt provides empirical evidence to illustrate some of the tensions that often arise due to the theoretical dichotomisation of the terms “leader” and “follower” (Collinson, 2017;
Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). The kind of analysis conducted above problematises such a

dichotomisation by showing that different people take on different roles throughout a
discussion, and that even “ordinary” team members – who are often referred to as “followers”
(e.g. Bligh, 2011), “collaborators” (Rost, 1995 in Uhl-Bien, 2006) or “partners” (Uhl-Bien et
al., 2000 in Uhl-Bien, 2006) in the business and organisational sciences literature – take an
active role (as reflected throughout an interaction; for example, by introducing a new topic,
interrupting (and taking over from) the official chair, taking and holding the floor, and using
inclusive pronouns (“we”), etc). If we view leadership as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005;
Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and as an exercise of influence
(Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), this kind of analysis
enables us to identify and trace how these activities are enacted on the micro-level throughout
the interaction (even beyond the short excerpt shown above), and how, on a turn-by-turn
basis, team members participate in the leadership processes – for instance by initiating new
topics, making contributions to move the discussion forward, interrupting and overlapping
with others to gain the floor, thereby actively deciding whose voice gets heard and whose
contributions are reflected and incorporated into the final decision.

The demonstrated “messiness” in which these diverse processes take place during an
interaction provides empirical evidence of how complex leadership processes are, and how
they are shared (although not necessarily equally!), and how as a consequence leadership is
co-produced among interlocutors. Observations like these, thus provide important evidence to
support claims that the theoretically constructed antagonisms in leader-follower dynamics are
highly problematic (Collinson, 2017), as they often cannot be upheld in empirical
investigations of actual practice. Such analyses, thereby, also contribute to attempts to
“denaturalise leadership” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 46) as proposed by critical leadership
studies, as they enable researchers to identify and describe the specific (discursive) processes
through which leadership is continuously constructed and negotiated among interlocutors throughout an interaction, rather than conceptualising it as an a priori characteristic or a trait associated with a particular person or position. It is precisely in this respect that research in applied linguistics and pragmatics has much to offer to critical leadership studies.

The next example further illustrates this, by demonstrating that the construction and negotiation of leadership is not always necessarily harmonious, and not every attempt at claiming a leadership role is successful. Rather, as recent theoretical contributions in critical leadership studies acknowledge, situated power relations are socially constructed, and are not always rationalised or reinforced, but may also sometimes be challenged and resisted (e.g. Collinson, 2014, 2017). Our analyses below illustrate how this can be captured analytically by drawing on some of the tools and processes regularly used in applied linguistics and pragmatics research.

Example 2 (from Schnurr, 2009b)

Context: During a meeting of the senior management team at an IT company in New Zealand with Neil, an external HR consultant. At this point in the meeting, Neil presents his vision for managing staff turnover in the company, which is one of the issues for which the company requires his consultation services. Neil’s plans are based on a distinction between two types of staff turnover, as he outlines in the excerpt below. Shaun is a senior manager and Victor, the CEO of the company.

1 Neil: So what I’ve got in here for top talent
2 is retention of top talent
3 and reduction and regrettable turnover
If, like in the example above, we understand leadership as a sense-making process or an exercise of influence, Neil’s initial outline of his vision of how to tackle the issue of staff turnover at the company (in lines 1–4) could be interpreted as claiming a leadership role. By attempting to specify how he plans to solve the company’s problem of high staff turnover, Neil sets himself up as being in charge of this particular issue (note also his choice of first person singular pronoun “I” in “what I’ve got in here” (line 1)), thus taking a central role in the team’s sense-making process and aiming to influence others to change their behaviour according to his vision. However, he does not get very far, as his explanations are interrupted by some of the members of the senior management team. In line 5 Shaun, one of the senior managers in the company, makes fun of Neil’s distinction between different types of staff turnover. This criticism together with the subsequent laughter, which is joined by Victor, the CEO and most senior member of the team, are potentially face-threatening and express Shaun and Victor’s criticism and rejection of Neil’s suggestion. Interrupting and challenging Neil at
this early stage in the discussion can also be seen as an expression of the senior management team’s resistance towards his approach more generally.

Although Neil attempts to regain the floor (and control over the discussion) by trying to justify himself (line 7) – which is characterised by two restarts and the pragmatic particle “I mean” – he gets further interrupted and ridiculed by Victor, who makes more fun of the distinction proposed by Neil by mimicking him in the form of an exaggerated question and answer sequence (lines 8 and 9). This is responded to with more laughter by Shaun, which further expresses his agreement with Victor and resistance to Neil’s attempts at leadership (line 10). Although Neil eventually joins the laughter (line 11), which seems to indicate that harmony among participants is re-established, Victor’s subsequent critical comment “it’s not very sensitive is it” (line 12) once again signals his resistance towards Neil’s plans, and further challenges Neil’s attempts at leadership. The question format and the utterance-final tag question, in particular, render Victor’s utterance very challenging, and make it clear that he is not convinced and does not subscribe to Neil’s vision, nor is he going to follow it. He, thus, challenges Neil’s leadership claims, and actively resists (rather than follows) him.

This short excerpt provides evidence for Collinson’s (2017: 280) claim that “despite their subordination, followers can often find ways to resist”. Similar observations, which further problematise often taken-for-granted “structural antagonisms in leader-follower dynamics” (Collins, 2017: 279), are made in a case study of Cheryl, a newly promoted team leader in a large multinational corporation in Hong Kong (Schnurr and Zayts, 2011). This study shows that many of Cheryl’s repeated claims for leadership, and her attempts to construct herself as the one in charge in the team’s weekly meetings, are not supported but rather challenged by the other team members, who, in turn, claim a leadership role for themselves. This is reflected, for example, when they disagree with or ignore Cheryl’s advice and suggestions, when they engage in discussions without her participation, and when they
dominate the decision-making and meeting management (see also Chan et al., fc). Cases like Cheryl and Neil show that “contestation is central to situated leader-follower dynamics” (Collinson, 2017: 280), and that “followers” often play a more active (and more critical) role in leadership than assumed in much of the business and organisational sciences research.

Analyses of actual interactions, like the ones conducted here, enable researchers to trace the specific processes through which leadership claims are made and responded to (by ratifying or resisting them) throughout an interaction, thus providing important empirical evidence to support current theoretical debates around terminological issues. Such analyses enable researchers to actually show how leadership – as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005; Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and an exercise of influence (Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013) – is indeed a continuous process of (discursive) construction and negotiation (Fairhurst, 2008, 2009) that does not reside within individual persons or positions, but is rather co-produced among interlocutors. In the next section we start to explore some of the methodological implications of these claims by critically discussing how we should research leadership with the aim of gaining further insights into “the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 53) that critical leadership studies so urgently call for.

**How can and should we research leadership?**

As we have seen in the examples and discussions in the previous section, one area where research in applied linguistics and pragmatics is particularly strong is in its ability to identify, trace and eventually capture the specific processes through which leadership roles and identities are claimed and enacted, as well as responded to, by focusing on the moment-by-moment unravelling of an interaction. By drawing on specific discourse analytical tools and
processes, insights into the actual practice(s) of leadership are gained – as opposed to the
recounted perceptions or post-experience evaluations often used by research conducted in
leadership psychology (see e.g. Fairhurst, 2007; Chen, 2008). But what are the
methodological implications of such an approach? How should we design our research
studies, what kinds of data should we aim to collect, and how should we process them in
order to generate findings that help us address some of the terminological issues outlined
above? We believe that the methodological approaches of current leadership research
conducted in applied linguistics and pragmatics have much to offer in this respect.

One of the few research papers that outlines the specific processes through which
leadership discourse can (and should) be researched is Clifton (2006), who provides a
comprehensive overview of the various steps involved in such an emic approach to
leadership. Following standard practice in Conversation Analysis, the first step is the
collection of data, which “should not be guided by a priori research theories” (Clifton, 2006:
205). Step 2 is the transcription of the data to illustrate “the machinery of the talk” and to put
the data into analysable form (Clifton, 2006: 205), which is then followed by the analysis,
which should be data driven and focus on themes that emerge from the data (rather than those
that have been pre-selected by the researcher). This final step in a Conversation Analysis
approach should consider both the structure of the talk as well as its wider implications.

Although these steps are very comprehensive, we would like to make a few additional
suggestions. Firstly, with regards to step 1, we believe it is important to be clear about the
object of study: is the study going to focus on a priori identified leaders (i.e. specific persons
or positions), thereby potentially upholding the problematic dichotomies of leaders and
followers discussed above; or is it going to explore the various processes of leadership
(however defined), thereby moving away from person-centred approaches? The answer to
this question has not only conceptual and analytical implications (as discussed above), but
has also several methodological consequences, since this decision impacts on what interactional data should be collected – i.e. data involving a specific person or an entire team or communicative event. While a focus on individuals in leadership positions can be operationalised relatively easily in terms of methodology (for example, by shadowing and audio/video-recoding a designated individual over a specific period of time; as, for example, in Schnurr 2009b), the latter focus involves several methodological challenges, such as identifying ways of collecting data that capture the contributions of the various people who may potentially be involved in doing leadership.

One concrete way of obtaining data to gain insights into the complexities of leadership by moving away from the dichotomies of leaders and followers is through following a particular project (rather than individuals) and gathering data from different angles to try to capture the various stages and aspects of the project (as in Choi and Schnurr, 2014). This involves acknowledging that leadership takes place outside well-researched business meetings, and that analysing a wider array of different kinds of interactional contexts – such as one-to-one interactions, emails, whatsapp messages, blogs, telephone conversations, etc. (e.g. Darics, 2017; Schnurr and Mak, 2011; Skovholt, 2015) – is crucial, if we want to gain genuinely new insights into the dynamics of leadership.

A second point to add to Clifton’s (2006) step-by-step approach refers to the third step regarding the analysis of the data. In analysing such potentially diverse datasets – including spoken, written and multimodal data – and adopting a data-driven approach that allows themes to emerge, guiding questions should not necessarily be: “Who is the leader?” and “How are they doing leadership?”; but rather: “Where is leadership happening?”, “Who is participating in these processes (and who is not)?”, “How is this (discursively and usually collectively) accomplished?”, and “What responses do the various claims at leadership generate?”. Such an approach, exploring these questions and moving away from being
person-centred, directly speaks to recent conceptualisations of leadership as co-produced and located in relations and interactions (e.g. Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). In this way, researchers are able to identify and describe the discursive processes through which leadership is collectively (although not necessarily always in harmony) constructed and negotiated among interlocutors. This approach is also be in line with critical leadership studies, which often “challenge the hegemonic view that leaders are the people in charge and followers are the people who are influenced” (Jackson and Parry, 2011: 95; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Alvesson, 1996). Example 3 illustrates this further.

Example 3 (from Mak and Lee, 2015; modified transcriptions)\(^1\)

**Context:** Instant messaging exchange between two colleagues, Charles and Ricky, who work at an electronics holdings company in Hong Kong. Ricky has just returned from meeting with a business partner at another company.

1 Charles: how did he say?
2 Ricky: how did he say?
3 he said
4 “cif\(^2\) is a must or we can’t make this business”
5 he ask “do you know cif?”
6 Charles: you should answer
7 “f????ck uuuu!!!”
8 Ricky: and I said
9 “it is impossible for us to sign cif with this quantity”

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\(^1\) Spelling and grammar has been left as in the original.

\(^2\) “Cif” is an abbreviation of “cost, insurance, freight”, which refers to an agreement, according to which the seller has to arrange/pay for specific items as part of the trade deal.
10 Charles: let’s talk to Samuel first

11 Ricky: really fuck him off

12 Charles: Relax

13 you are not alone

In approaching this excerpt for analysis with the questions outlined above, one could begin by identifying some of the utterances in which leadership is taking place. If we view leadership as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005; Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) or as an exercise of influence (Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), we could argue that leadership is happening at several places during this relatively short excerpt. For example, throughout the interaction, both Charles and Ricky are collaboratively trying to make sense of Ricky’s recent encounter with a business partner. Initially, Charles invites his colleague to report back on this recent business meeting (line 1), before giving some concrete and relatively explicit – even if humorous – advice on what Ricky should do (using the relatively direct formulation ‘you should’ (line 6)). By trying to influence Ricky’s future actions (i.e. by using the imperative formulations to “talk to Samuel first” (line 10) and “relax” (line 12)), Charles at the same time claims a leadership role for himself, which is legitimised by Ricky, as his cooperative and affirmative responses indicate. Ricky provides the requested information (lines 2–5) and complies with Charles’ advice and suggestion for future action by giving more information (lines 8 and 9) and repeating his frustration over the meeting (line 11).

This analysis shows, once again, that leadership is a collaborative activity (e.g. as reflected in Ricky and Charles’ conjoint sense-making and negotiation of meaning), and leadership roles do not reside in individuals or positions. They are, instead, claimed and dynamically negotiated among interlocutors as an interaction unfolds. These observations
provide further evidence in support of critical leadership studies’ rejection of hegemonic views of leaders and followers, and they also demonstrate that, if we really want to gain insights into “the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 53) that critical leadership studies call for, we need to rethink our methodological approach and move away from a focus on individual “leaders” (and “followers”). These binary categories – especially when assigned a priori – are too static and limiting to describe the diversity and perhaps messiness of leadership in situ. Clearly, leadership claims – especially when understood as negotiating meaning and sense-making processes – can be made by anyone – not just those in specific positions or with particular job titles – and they can be responded to in a variety of ways – either being accepted and reinforced, or resisted and challenged.

Equipping researchers with the tools and processes to capture these complexities and to describe how leadership is accomplished in situ – more or less collaboratively (although not necessarily in harmony) – among different people and in different interactional contexts, is one concrete way in which applied linguistic and pragmatic research can make important contributions to leadership scholars across disciplines. However, in spite of this huge potential to make important contributions to leadership research in other disciplines and to directly address some of the current debates in critical leadership studies, most studies conducted in applied linguistics and pragmatics fail to be acknowledged outside of their own disciplinary silo; their findings tend to be overlooked, and, as a consequence, their voices are often not heard in current debates about leadership discourse. However, we believe that this is a missed opportunity, and that research in applied linguistics and pragmatics has a lot to offer to leadership research in business and organisational sciences, and especially to critical leadership studies. It is, therefore, about time that researchers in both disciplines establish a more systematic and open on-going dialogue with each other.
Towards a more open and engaging dialogue

This paper has addressed the current lack of imagination and innovation in leadership research lamented by Tourish (2015) and the need for a “radical rethinking” called for by Alvesson (1996), by providing some concrete suggestions of how leadership research in business and organisational sciences could benefit from engaging in a more open and systematic dialogue with leadership research conducted in applied linguistics and pragmatics. We have argued that it is about time that the silos between these disciplines are broken down to enable a more productive cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches. Such an endeavour, as we have shown, would be particularly beneficial for critical leadership studies, as applied linguistics and pragmatic research can offer the analytical tools and processes to support critical leadership researchers in their quest to challenge hegemonic notions of leadership, by moving beyond simplistic and often problematic leader-follower dichotomies (e.g. Collinson, 2011, 2017) and providing empirical evidence to capture leadership in situ, thereby supporting (or possibly challenging) current theorisations of leadership and generating “wider implications for conceptualisations of leadership” (Choi and Schnurr, 2014: 18).

Focusing on these two aspects, we have analysed three examples of leadership discourse to illustrate what could be gained by such an approach. Our analyses have identified and described some of the concrete discursive processes through which leadership is shared and co-produced among different people throughout an interaction, and how, by portraying themselves in particular ways (e.g. as being particularly knowledgeable (Example 1) or innovative and having the answer to a problem (Example 2)), different individuals make claims for leadership, which are then responded to by others who may affirm (Example 3) or reject (Example 2) these claims. Such an analysis of the collaborative construction and
negotiation of leadership – on a turn-by-turn basis as an interaction unfolds (Clifton, 2006, 2012) – has also provided evidence for claims that these processes do not always occur harmoniously and that, in fact, not every attempt at leadership is successful (Examples 1 and 2). Rather, situated power relations are socially constructed, and do not always necessarily get rationalised or reinforced, but may also sometimes be challenged and resisted (e.g. Collinson, 2014, 2017).

In addition to providing empirical evidence to feed into current theoretical debates, a more systematic and open engagement with research in applied linguistics and pragmatics could also lead to a rethinking of methodological and analytical issues with the aim of facilitating and supporting attempts to capture the “everyday work of leadership” that Alvesson and Spicer (2104: 53) and other critical leadership scholars call for. Such an engagement could lead, as we have suggested, to a rethinking of methodological approaches and a new set of analytical questions. Based on conceptualisations of leadership as co-constructed, shared, resisted, contested, and continuously (but not necessarily harmoniously) negotiated in and through interaction, guiding questions for an enhanced analysis could take a more exploratory form and would stimulate more data-driven conceptualisations of leadership processes, rather than being constrained by a priori – and often person- or position-centred – assumptions. Such questions could include: “Where is leadership (in the plural) happening?”, “Who is participating in leadership (and who is not)?”, “How are power dynamics and agency enacted and negotiated among a team?”, “How (as well as by whom and to what effect) are situated power relations either reinforced or challenged?”, “How is this (discursively and usually collectively (although not necessarily harmoniously)) accomplished?”, and “What responses do the various claims at leadership generate?”. These questions directly address (and largely avoid) problematic leader-follower dichotomies which often form the basis of leadership research in business and organisational sciences.
Although the focus of this paper was on several concrete issues relating to theoretical and conceptual debates, as well as the methodological and analytical approaches that current leadership scholarship are grappling with, the ideas and discussions presented here could equally well be applied to other issues. For example, they could bring fresh air to some of the discussions around relational leadership. Drawing on some of the tools and processes illustrated in the analyses in this paper could, thus, also lead to new insights into the “relational dynamics by which leadership is developed” and the specific processes and dynamics through which “relationships form and develop” – which are two main avenues for future research for relational leadership outlined by Uhl-Bien (2006: 672). Research conducted within applied linguistics and pragmatics may also help in addressing many of the other questions currently on the research agenda for relational leadership, including “How do effective leadership relationships develop, and […] what are the relational processes that comprise effective collective relational leadership practice?” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2012: 312).

Due to the widely acknowledged central role that language and communication play in the formation and development of relationships, the discourse analytical tools and processes regularly used by researchers in applied linguistics and pragmatics seem particularly geared to advance thinking around these issues – by “reveal[ing] how previously ‘abstract’ constructs can be made visible in talk” (Clifton, 2006: 217; Kelly, 2008), as showcased in the analyses above.

There are endless possibilities of where research in applied linguistics and pragmatics could make important contributions to current leadership scholarship across disciplines. This, to date, largely overlooked research should, therefore, be taken more seriously, and a concerted effort should be made to more systematically and enthusiastically engage with this “other” branch of leadership research. It clearly has the potential to become a valuable ally in
the endeavour to challenge hegemonic perspectives and to denaturalise leadership, thereby bringing much needed fresh air to the current state of leadership research.

While the examples and arguments presented in this paper have inevitably been influenced by our own research and our own thinking, we hope that future research may find some of them useful and will take up and address some of the issues identified here. We agree with Uhl-Bien et al. (2012: 319) that this “is an exciting time to be in leadership research”, and we believe that a more engaging, open and systematic exchange of ideas between different fields of leadership research will enable us to address the conceptual, analytical and methodological challenges that leadership research is currently facing.

**Transcription conventions**

- [laughs] paralinguistic features in square brackets
- + pause of up to one second
- …//…\ simultaneous speech
- …/…\ transcriber’s best guess at an unclear utterance
- ? rising or question intonation
- [drawls]:…: drawling of words in between the colons
- ( ) unclear utterance
- (0.5) pause of 0.5 seconds
References


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