Shaping patterns of engagement: Recontextualization practices in managing organizational change

Suvi Honkanen, Riikka Nissi
University of Vaasa, Finland

Professional texts are often a result of complex recontextualization processes in which elements of prior discourses are recycled and manipulated for the purposes of new contexts (Linell 1998). This presentation examines how such recontextualization practices may shape situational and social roles at a workplace in the context of collaborative decision making.

Our data originates from a Finnish city conducting large-scale organizational change in its service sector. More specifically, it consists of a group of interrelated texts and face-to-face encounters through which the change proceeds. The change has been initiated by the Ministry of Finance, who has provided written guidelines to help to coordinate the process. Our goal is to study how these guidelines are implemented at an early phase, during which the project members are expected to collaborate to define the project’s targets of future action.

Our analysis first demonstrates that implementing the guidelines results in an intertextual chain (Fairclough 1992) consisting of 5 stages. Analyzing the relevant linguistic choices along this chain, we then demonstrate how different participants with different institutional rights are given a voice during the decision making process. The results show that the targets of future action are defined by the project manager alone in an official report at the end of the chain. Defining the targets, the manager however makes use of the prior discourses produced by her subordinates at all earlier stages. This is done by both abstracting the targets from the prior discourses and manipulating their original sequential contexts. The results thus open up a space for further discussion concerning the different participants’ opportunities for participating and engaging in joint strategic planning.


Keywords: Intertextual chain, Recontextualization practices, Joint decision making.