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Language in the Workplace : The Virtues and Limits of an Ethnographical Approach

The different approaches represented in the network of “Language and Work” seem to me to be related by an ethnographical sensibility, which has concerned linguists, sociologists and psychologists as much as it has researchers in management.

This anthropological and ethnographical dimension of research has constituted a common language, necessary for collaboration between disciplines. On the level of conceptual and theoretical openings, anthropology invites us to understand the processes at the heart of situations and cultures. On a methodological level, the influence of anthropology and ethnography on various practices can be demonstrated in several ways: recourse to field work (allowing for both observation and dialogue with agents), primacy of situated activities, coming and going between a detailed principle and a global principle, heterogeneity of materials and multidimensional nature of the analyses.

Studies conducted according to this procedure have resulted in *a knowledge of the functioning of language in a context of the workplace*, from its forms, its finalities and its focuses. Some of the essential knowledge is: links between speech and activity, the contribution of language to the diverse demands of coordination, the necessity of communication for the training and development of abilities, and the relationship of language to professional identities and to organizational cultures.

However, this dimension is not enough to characterize the project which has driven the network of Language and Work: the link with social demand and thoughts on the evolution of work imply a move away from a purely anthropological perspective in order to turn to social questions, as the progressive constitution of research thematics shows, which will be briefly addressed in my conclusion.