



No. 24 ISSN 2450-0402

.....

Discourses on Culture

.....

Editor-in-chief: Iga Maria Lehman



No. 24 ISSN 2450-0402

Discourses on Culture

Editor-in-chief: **Iga Maria Lehman**

Łódź 2025


WYDAWNICTWO
SPOŁECZNEJ AKADEMII NAUK

The electronic version is the primary version of the journal

<http://dyskursy.san.edu.pl>

All the articles published in the journal are subject to reviews.

Editor-in-chief: **Iga Maria Lehman**

Adjustment: Julia Żak

Text design and typesetting: Studio Grafpa, www.grafpa.pl

Cover design: Studio Grafpa, www.grafpa.pl

© copyright Społeczna Akademia Nauk and Authors

under the Creative Commons License CC BY-NC-ND

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

ISSN 2450-0402

University of Social Sciences Publishing House

Sienkiewicza 9, 90-113 Łódź

e-mail: discourses@san.edu.pl



.....

Table of Contents

.....

7 **Iga Maria Lehman** | Preface: The Linguistic Foundations of Management: Insights Across Contexts

Articles

13 Why Words Matter: An Interview with Prof. Gail Fairhurst on Leadership and Discourse

19 **Łukasz Sułkowski, Agnieszka (Aggie) Chidlow, Iga Maria Lehman** | Language and Generative AI: A New Paradigm of Organizational Research

45 **Janne Tienari, Violetta Khoreva** | Through the Magic Lens: Management, Language, and AI

73 **Gabriela Philipp, Łukasz Sułkowski** | Generative AI and Generation Z: Redefining Language, Identity, and Communication in the Digital Workplace

105 **Mike Szymanski, Evodio Kaltenecker** | Why Language Matters in Management: Regional Contributions to a Global Conversation

133 **Silvana Tode Neshkovska** | Crisis Leadership: Language, Power, and the Construction of Legitimacy in War Narratives

161 **Jorge Leal da Silva, Adolfo Garcé** | Beyond the Buzzwords: Why Ideas and Discourse Matter in Management

189 **Jagat Bahadur Kunwara** | Discursive Boundary-Making and Contested Legitimacy: A Multicultural Center in Vernacular Publics

- 223 **Jesse W. C. Yip, Jeff H. Y. Lau, Ka Ching Kelsey Pang** | Discursive Leadership in the Beatles' Lyrics: Positioning, Feminism, and the Cultural Management of Meaning
- 259 **Kantapon Intamart** | Guardians of Grammar, Gatekeepers of Gender: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Académie Française's Report on the Feminization of Professional Titles
- 287 **Zübeyde Yaraş, Seda Gündüzalp** | Quality Culture and Impact Dynamics in Educational Institutions: A Qualitative Analysis Based on the Experiences of School Administrators
- 325 **Antony Hoyte-West** | On Institutional Translation in a Fictional Context: Interdisciplinary Remarks on the Structure and Hierarchy of the Royal Institute of Translation in R. F. Kuang's *Babel*

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0010

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Preface

The Linguistic Foundations of Management: Insights Across Contexts

Article history:

Received 10 December 2025

Available online 16 December 2025

The 24th issue of *Discourses on Culture* brings together a collection of works that examine one of the most pressing and dynamic questions in contemporary management research: why, and how, language matters. As outlined in the Call for Papers for this thematic issue, scholarly attention to language has grown significantly, including across organizational theory, international business and critical management studies. This issue responds directly to that call by showcasing contributions that move beyond a functional perspective of institutional language use toward perspectives emphasizing inclusivity, reflexivity, responsibility, and ethical practice in multilingual and multicultural organizational contexts.

At a moment when technological change and globalization are rapidly changing the nature of communication within organizations, language is emerging as a fundamental element in dealing with the challenges these changes are bringing on both institutional and individual level. This is powerfully articulated in the opening interview with Professor Gail Fairhurst, whose extensive body of work on discursive leadership provides a conceptual anchor for the entire issue. Fairhurst reminds us that leaders “do things with words”, and that discourses furnish the repertoires through which both leadership and followership are enacted. She calls for more nuanced, mindful, and dialogic approaches to organizational tensions, particularly those arising from paradox, technological acceleration, and the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The articles that follow take up these challenges from diverse disciplinary, methodological, and cultural standpoints. Several contributions engage directly with the rapidly evolving landscape of generative AI. The opening article by Sułkowski, Chidlow, and Lehman proposes algorithmic discourse research as a new paradigm for organizational inquiry, arguing that large language models (LLMs) are now discursive actors shaping communication, sensemaking, and knowledge production.

Complementing this, Tienari and Khoreva offer a critical perspective on how management “performs” AI as magic, revealing the ideological work done through language in an era of technological hype. This theme is expanded in Philipp and Sułkowski’s analysis of Generation Z in hybrid workplaces, which highlights how AI tools mediate identity, feedback, and collaboration. Their narrative review underscores the shifting norms of workplace digital communication and illuminates the potential tension between efficiency and authenticity. These articles point to the profound linguistic and cultural realignments unfolding as AI becomes integral to organizational life.

Other contributions broaden the scope of the issue by foregrounding regional, political, and cultural contexts. Szymański and Kaltenecker map Latin American scholarship on language and management, revealing how local histories and linguistic practices enrich global debates. Neshkovska’s analysis of wartime political discourse, although focused on geopolitical crises, offers insights highly relevant to organizational crisis communication, showing how narratives of victimhood, legitimacy, and moral polarization operate through powerful linguistic choices. The role of ideas and discourse in institutional analysis is examined by

Silva and Garcé, who revisit the “argumentative turn” and argue for discourses as epistemological pillars in management studies. This attention to legitimacy and public discourse is further developed in Kunwar’s study of vernacular publics in Finland, which demonstrates how everyday online debates can destabilize institutional legitimacy through irony, affect, and boundary-making.

Several articles explore discourse in domains where culture, representation, and identity intersect. Yip’s analysis of Beatles lyrics shows how popular culture can function as a site of discursive leadership, shaping gender identities and social meanings. Intamart’s critical discourse analysis of the *Académie française* illustrates how institutional language policies work to maintain symbolic boundaries and gendered hierarchies. Gündüzalp brings the discussion back to organizational practice by demonstrating how school leaders communicate, negotiate, and cultivate a “quality culture” within educational institutions. Finally, Hoyte-West takes us into the fictional universe of *Babel*, offering an interdisciplinary reflection on the institutional management of translation and hierarchy in a colonial fantasy setting, providing a creative commentary on language and power.

The contributions in this volume offer an expansive, critical, and forward-looking perspective on language in management. They invite us to rethink how linguistic choices shape inclusion and exclusion; how discourses construct power, legitimacy, and identity; how communication mediates crises and change; and how AI challenges our assumptions about authenticity, agency, and meaning.

As Editor-in-Chief, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all authors and reviewers who contributed to this issue. My gratitude also goes to Professor Gail Fairhurst for her illuminating interview, which sets the tone for the contributions that follow.

We hope that this issue not only advances scholarly conversations but also serves as an invitation to continue exploring how language remains central to the ethical, cultural, and strategic challenges of contemporary organizational life.

Iga Maria Lehman

WSB University in Warsaw

iga.lehman@wsb.edu.pl

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2092-8119

November, 2025



Articles

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0011

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Why Words Matter: An Interview with Prof. Gail Fairhurst on Leadership and Discourse

Article history:

Received 16 October 2025

Available online 16 December 2025



Gail Fairhurst



Iga Maria Lehman

Iga Maria Lehman (IML): From your experience and studies, can you say why language and discourse matter so deeply in management and leadership?

Gail Fairhurst (GF): It's hard to know where to begin, quite honestly. This is because language is not simply a reflection of reality but constitutive of it. Leaders and managers “do” things with words e.g., promise, order, accept, command, etc. (Austin, 1962)—while direct reports (and others in their role set) hold them to account as they try to decide “Can my boss be trusted?”. Discourses, in turn, are (sociohistorical) ways of thinking but also ways speaking and acting. They supply linguistic and behavioral repertoires, or tools bags, that bring about leadership and followership performances as actions and interactions in the doings of things with words (Wetherell, 1998).

IML: Your work has emphasized framing in leadership discourse. How do the discourse practices of framing shape power relations, inclusion, and identity in organizations?

GF: Along with the materials in the environment, leaders and followers use their linguistic tools bags to frame (read, position) themselves with respect to one another i.e., to show deference, dominance, equality, etc. As these “positionings” repeat over time, patterns form and scale up in various ways to constitute identities, relationships, hierarchies, organizations, systems, and societies (Fairhurst, 2007).

IML: I know discourse is an integral element in your research on paradox and problem-centered leadership, could you describe exactly what role it plays?

GF: I study paradox and paradoxical tensions, which are bipolar relationships that compete, contradict, or form ironic or absurd relationships with one another (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024). We can spot these tensions in talk and interaction when actors use language or describe actions that show strain, conflict, or the push-pull between opposing poles. It also helps to know that clashing discourses generate paradoxical tensions. For example, we can

see clashing discourses in the case of a nonprofit whose social mission [read, discourse] is often in tension with its business mission [discourse]. Because the nonprofit requires funding to stay afloat, it may not be able to do everything it wants to do on the social side.

The “push-pull” between these discourses says a great deal about how power is enacted. If one discourse dominates another (e.g., too much attention to either mission), a paradox approach says this is often a sign of “either-or” thinking. We might want to avoid such a response if it fails to address the complexity of a situation when both poles of a tension are meritorious (e.g., a social *and* business mission). Actors engage in either-or thinking when they react defensively, deny competing poles, select only one pole, project tensions onto other actors or events, or vacillate between poles (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Instead, paradox scholars recommend embracing “both-and” thinking, which tries to marry the interests of both poles by balancing the two. Balance can entail trade-offs or the integration of opposites, although it can also lead to unpopular compromise. Alternatively, “more than” thinking uses dialogue, collective reflection, narratives, and/or metaphors to create space for creative thinking that promotes the interests of both opposing poles (Putnam et al., 2016). It is frequently a healthier way for collectives to address conflicting yet interdependent interests for mutually satisfactory solutions.

IML: This *DoC* issue highlights the importance of moving beyond instrumental views of language toward inclusivity and reflexivity. How can leaders use discourse to build more inclusive, responsible, and participatory organizational cultures?

GF: Well, in addition to the “more than” practices described above, I think it is important that individual leaders adopt mindfulness practices that encourage reflexivity through pausing or taking a step back to consider how they (and others) are communicating and with what consequences (Fairhurst et al., 2025). I then think it is important for leaders to foster a sense of *collective mindfulness* on a regular

basis with their teams to clarify values like participation and inclusivity, but also strategic direction, meeting performance goals, and, not least, acting with integrity. Obviously, there are specific, on-the-ground practices for inclusive, responsible, and participatory workplaces, but I'll leave those to another discussion.

IML: With the rise of AI and digital communication tools, what kinds of linguistic or discursive challenges and opportunities do you see emerging for leadership communication and organizational voice in the near future?

GF: I think that the many amazing things that AI and digital communication tools can bring to leadership communication has to be balanced by a recognition of their limitations. In the case of AI, leaders (and followers) can and should use these tools to, say, acquire information or sharpen their word choices or sentence structures. However, if leaders use AI to construct the entirety of their messaging, it risks making them appear hollow and inauthentic because AI-generated content is very easy to spot. As for digital communication tools, we saw how valuable they were during the pandemic and how these tools have been incorporated into our post-pandemic routines. That said, how much is too much digital communication? There is still so much that we do not know about the levels of engagement with various digital tools relative to in person interactions and the overall impact on leadership, followership, and organizational learning.

IML: Looking ahead, what questions about language, discourse, and management do you think are most pressing for researchers and practitioners to explore?

GF: I think I've named a few already. However, I would underscore the importance of understanding the influence of tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes created by rapid technological advance, globalization, and divisive politics on leaders and their organizations today. Once tensions and contradictions were thought of as anomalies in organizational life, now they are the "new normal" because the pace of change has intensified so dramatically. Ways must be found to cope and respond to them in sustainable ways—and, if early research is any indication, leadership communication skills will require deftness, nuance, and sophistication.

References

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fairhurst, G. T. (2007). *Discursive leadership: In conversation with leadership psychology*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Fairhurst, G. T., & Putnam, L. L. (2024). *Performing organizational paradoxes* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Fairhurst, G. T., Town, S., & Tracy, S. (2025). *Exploring leaders' mindfulness in navigating organizational paradoxical tensions*. Unpublished manuscript. University of Cincinnati.

Putnam, L. L., Fairhurst, G. T., & Banghart, S. (2016). Contradictions, dialectics, and paradoxes in organizations: A constitutive approach. *Academy of Management Annals*, 10(1), 65–171.

Smith, W. K., & Lewis, M. W. (2011). Toward a theory of paradox: A dynamic equilibrium model of organizing. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(2), 381–403.

Wetherell, M. (1998). Positioning and interpretative repertoires: Conversation analysis and post-structuralism in dialogue. *Discourse & Society*, 9(3), 387–412.

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0012

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Łukasz Sułkowski

Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland

lukasz.sulkowski@uj.edu.pl

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1248-2743

Agnieszka (Aggie) Chidlow

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

a.chidlow@bham.ac.uk

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0855-6332

Iga Maria Lehman

WSB University in Warsaw, Poland

iga.lehman@wsb.edu.pl

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2092-8119

Language and Generative
AI: A New Paradigm of
Organizational Research

Article history:**Received** 14 October 2025**Revised** 15 October 2025**Accepted** 15 October 2025**Available online** 16 December 2025

Abstract: Language is not merely a medium of communication but a constitutive force in organization management. Three decades after the first “linguistic turn” in organization studies, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and large language models (LLMs) are provoking a second, data-intensive turn that reconfigures the relationship between language, technology, and management. LLMs now operate as discursive actors that simulate, generate, and transform organizational communication.

This paper advances algorithmic discourse research as a new paradigm for studying language in organizations. It reframes methodological rigor as pluralistic and reflexive, combining computational scale with interpretive depth. It retains traditional standards of evidence while extending them to encompass ethical and contextual reflexivity, acknowledging that meaning, data, and validity are co-constructed.

An integrated multilevel framework links micro-linguistic forms (lexical, metaphorical, modal), meso-level routines and narratives, and macro-level outcomes such as innovation, trust, and performance. The new paradigm expands the methodological and epistemological foundations of organizational research by positioning language as both data and process, and LLMs as analytic partners in the study of sensemaking. In doing so, it marks a shift from observing discourse to co-engaging with algorithmic language, opening new avenues for understanding how organizations think, communicate, and act in the age of AI.

Keywords: algorithmic discourse research, Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), organizational discourse, methodological reflexivity, epistemology of AI

Introduction

In an era defined by globalization, migration, and digital transformation, organizations increasingly operate in a hyper-linguistic world. Language is no longer a neutral conduit for communication but a strategic, ethical, organizational and political resource. Managers must navigate not only multiple languages and dialects but also the socio-cultural dynamics of inclusion, voice, and legitimacy. Thus, the study of organizational language has become both a methodological frontier and a strategic imperative.

This article builds on the earlier issue of *Discourses on Culture (DoC 22)*, which redefined leadership as a relational, rhetorical, and discursive process (Grint, 2000; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). That issue emphasized how leadership emerges not from static roles but from situated interactions shaped by discourse, material conditions, and symbolic constructions of context (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009; Bitzer, 1968). Here, we extend that conversation by exploring how generative AI (GenAI) and large language models (LLMs) are transforming organizational discourse, not just as analytical tools, but as simulated interlocutors and actors in the communication of aspects of organization leadership, and working practices.

Foundational theories in management have long recognized the central role of language. Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explain how language shapes group identity and cohesion. Storytelling inspires action (Denning, 2005), inclusive phrasing fosters psychological safety, and shared terminologies encode organizational culture (Schein, 1992). As Grint (2005) and Fairhurst (2011) show, leadership is not exercised within a fixed context but created through how leaders define and frame that context rhetorically. From this perspective, language plays a central role in shaping organizational reality.

Three decades ago, the “linguistic turn” in organization studies made this insight explicit: scholars began viewing organizations as discursively constructed through narrative, metaphor, and symbolic framing (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Fairclough, 2005). However, this early analysis through the lens of discourse was often limited by small-scale qualitative methods. While corpus linguistics and automated text analysis have expanded scale, they remain

methodologically constrained in addressing the multilingual, multicultural, and power-laden dynamics of contemporary organizational communication.

Meanwhile, executive practice has rapidly embraced GenAI (Brzozowska et al., 2023). A majority of firms now use AI-driven tools to analyze sentiment, simulate strategy narratives, and even generate compliance or policy texts. LLMs are no longer merely passive tools. When used to draft communications or simulate strategy messaging, they influence the language and framing through which decisions, leadership, and culture are enacted (Jarco & Sułkowski 2023).

These twin trends, a renewed scholarly focus on language in organization and a technological leap in language creation and use, call for a second linguistic turn in management studies: one grounded in both critical discourse theory and algorithmic mediation. Scholars have noted that LLMs are inherently modeling varieties of language, including dialects, roles, and identity markers (Grieve et al., 2025). Yet management research has yet to fully theorize the implications of LLMs as discursive actors within organizations. This article proposes to do so.

We introduce a new research paradigm, namely, algorithmic discourse research (ADR), that integrates linguistic insight, organizational theory, and GenAI's affordances. The ADR represents both a methodological and epistemological shift in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1962), reconfiguring assumptions about ontology, epistemology, and method. Methodologically, it introduces novel AI-enabled research designs that combine computational scale with interpretive depth; epistemologically, it reframes how knowledge is generated and validated through a reflexive, context-aware engagement with language. The ADR treats language models not just as analytic tools, but as rhetorical and epistemic agents that co-construct organizational realities. While the ADR retains data-driven commitment to evidence and computational rigor, it adds a discursive and reflexive dimension, recognizing that language data are not neutral but value-laden and contextually situated. In this sense, the ADR may be understood as a recalibrated empiricism: aligned with the scale and precision of the fourth paradigm, yet broadened by sensitivity to meaning, interpretation, and organizational context.

We proceed conceptually rather than empirically. First, we revisit how prior research has conceptualized organizational language. Then, we examine how GenAI reshapes discursive possibilities, from multilingual simulations to

agent-based dialogue systems. Finally, we propose a multilevel framework and agenda for studying GenAI-mediated discourse, touching on leadership, power, inclusion, and organizational outcomes. While the framework links GenAI-mediated discourse from micro-level language to macro-level outcomes, it also points to an important caveat. GenAI appears to draw heavily on Anglo-American leadership ideals, such as individualism, assertiveness, and heroic masculinity, which may limit its sensitivity to alternative cultural models. This raises questions about how universal its insights can be and underscores the need for more contextually inclusive approaches (Westwood & Chan, 2001). Thus, understanding how GenAI transforms what language can do in organizations is both an empirical challenge and a critical opportunity for contemporary management research.

Literature Review

Early discourse scholarship emphasized that organizational reality is socially constructed through language (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Researchers showed how leaders' framing, metaphors, and narratives actively shape culture, strategy, and power relations (Fairclough, 2005; Denning, 2005; Spolsky, 2004). Key insights emerged: language is constitutive (not just reflective) of organization, ambiguity fosters multiple interpretations, and narratives give collective identity and purpose (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Fairclough, 2005). For example, the simple act of describing a strategy as "aggressive" or "responsible" can alter investors' perceptions or employees' attitudes. These studies drew on theories from linguistics and social psychology, e.g., Communication Accommodation Theory shows how people adjust speech to converge or diverge socially, shaping group cohesion. Social Identity Theory explains how language signals in-group membership and values (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Likewise, the sociology of language highlights that language serves as a vehicle for transmitting organizational culture (Schein, 1992, p. 236). Schein (1992), for example, noted that shared terminologies and stories encode implicit assumptions.

This line of work generated a rich understanding of internal processes. For instance, research on leadership found that through the effective use of language, leaders can articulate a compelling vision that aligns with the linguistic preferences of their employees, enhancing engagement and commitment (Fairhurst, 2011; Denning, 2005; Kahn, 1990). While early theorists focused on language as a vehicle for communication or culture transmission (e.g., Schein, 1992), our argument moves beyond this conduit model, emphasizing that language is constitutive, it actively shapes, rather than merely conveys, organizational reality. Studies on communication underscored that managers' linguistic skill affects trust and that inclusive phrasing promotes psychological safety. Investigations into diversity flagged both challenges and opportunities: a multilingual workforce is both an asset and a challenge as multiple languages can spur creativity, but also create barriers if not managed. Empirical surveys show firms with clear language policies and training (e.g. in second-language support) have higher employee engagement and fewer misunderstandings (Holmes, 2006). In sum, the literature established that organizational behavior is mediated by symbolic and linguistic processes, from cross-cultural communication (Hall, 1976) to narrative leadership (Denning, 2005).

However, these qualitative insights had practical limits. Most classic discourse studies were narrow in scope, e.g. single ethnographies or interview transcripts, making it hard to generalize. Manual coding of texts limited sample sizes, and researchers often worried about observer effects (as employees might alter language if recorded). Computational corpus linguistics partially addressed scale (e.g., through keyword counts or topic modeling on large documents), but it remained disconnected from the cutting edge of linguistic computation. Importantly, until recently, language and management research remained largely separate disciplines: management scholars rarely engaged computational linguistics, and language technologists seldom considered organizational contexts.

Yet context is not a neutral backdrop; it shapes both the production, content and interpretation of organizational discourse. In our theoretical framing, context is integral rather than peripheral. ADR explicitly operates on

the premise that context both shapes and is shaped by language. We describe the paradigm as a “situated, contextually nuanced epistemology” to signal that any analysis involving LLMs must account for the situational and cultural conditions surrounding the data. Accordingly, the proposed methodology pairs AI with human, context-aware oversight to ensure that interpretations remain reflexive and grounded in meaning. This contextual sensitivity is particularly important given the dominance of certain linguistic and cultural frames in organizational life. Dominant Anglo-American leadership discourses, saturated with values such as individualism, assertiveness, and heroic masculinity, have been exported globally “along with Coca-Cola and blue jeans” (Westwood & Chan, 2001, p. 204). Such discourses are treated as universal even though they clearly reflect culturally bounded assumptions that marginalize alternative traditions and perspectives, such as East Asian models of headship rooted in harmony and cohesion.

Meanwhile, the field of education and second-language acquisition has been a proving ground for generative AI’s impact on language. Numerous studies (Creely, 2024; Lai, 2025; Daud et al. 2025) document that LLM-based tutors and writing assistants can personalize learning. For example, AI platforms now provide interactive grammar correction and vocabulary feedback; in classroom experiments, these tools have been shown to significantly benefit learners, particularly in acquiring new languages. Pack & Maloney (2023) and Wei (2023) report that introducing generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT) into language instruction increases student engagement and even short-term performance: students using AI tools often write longer, more complex texts and report higher motivation.

However, these studies also warn of challenges such as issues of academic integrity, overreliance on AI, and potential cognitive or cultural biases. These challenges are not merely technical but speak directly to underlying scientific values. Within a data-intensive paradigm, researchers inevitably make value-laden choices about data selection, fairness, and interpretive framing. Cognitive biases, for instance, arise when learners or systems overgeneralize AI outputs or adopt erroneous patterns that reflect the statistical shortcuts of training data (e.g., fossilizing non-standard grammar), while cultural biases emerge when LLMs reproduce dominant cultural references, stereotypes, or idioms

that marginalize alternative perspectives. Such phenomena illustrate how value judgments about what counts as accurate, fair, or representative are embedded within computational processes themselves. Rather than downplaying this, the ADR emphasizes transparency and reflexivity around these choices, recognizing that context and human judgment shape what counts as valid data or evidence. Traditional values such as rigor and reproducibility remain vital, but the value set is broadened to include ethical commitments to inclusivity, bias awareness, and cultural sensitivity as integral dimensions of methodological robustness in the AI era.

These challenges are not merely technical but tied to scientific and epistemic values, that is, to the standards by which research communities determine what counts as legitimate language, knowledge, and voice. Studies of multilingual academic publishing show how EAL scholars must navigate Anglo-centric rhetorical norms at the expense of their own voices and culturally situated ways of writing (Lehman & Sułkowski, 2023). As Ibarra-Colado observed in the context of Latin American organization studies, “to be allowed in you must deny your own identity: to belong in ‘the international community’, you must speak the Centre’s language, use its concepts, discuss its agendas” (2006, p. 471). This signals a wider loss, not only of linguistic diversity but also of epistemic traditions for making sense of the world. Similar dynamics are visible in organizational scholarship, where English-language conventions privilege monologic, formulaic styles and marginalize alternative perspectives (Lehman & Tienari, 2024). In intercultural communication, such biases can generate semantic noise: messages may be linguistically correct yet pragmatically misaligned, reinforcing misunderstanding, exclusion, or unequal power relations.

Crucially, generative AI also promises to support endangered and low-resource languages. Recent work shows that AI-driven tools can document and teach nearly extinct languages, democratizing access (Wang, 2024). At the same time, Zaki and Ahmed (2024) argue that AI-powered translation systems could bridge linguistic divides and promote communication equity, but only if designed with cultural sensitivity. In sum, the language-education literature underscores that AI is a double-edged sword: it creates unprecedented learning opportunities (adaptive, interactive content) but raises pedagogical and ethical questions.

These insights foreshadow the broader stakes when LLMs are deployed in organizational settings.

Generative AI and the Transformation of Scholarly Inquiry

Generative AI (especially LLMs) has begun to attract scholarly attention in management and organization studies. A recent editorial essay by Cornelissen et al. (2024) argued that LLMs might support theoretical development in organization studies, offering unique conceptual frameworks. Empirical work is still nascent, but trends are visible: firms increasingly integrate AI into decision support, marketing, HR, and innovation processes. Organizations are deploying generative AI not only to parse customer sentiment and automate reporting, but also to optimize operational logistics, supply chain planning, and executive decision support systems. LLMs can therefore be seen as “linguistic actors”, insofar as they produce, reframe, and circulate discourse within organizations. Rather than only classifying existing text, they generate new narratives, metaphors, and formulations that can shape managerial communication and decision-making. For example, analyses of board meeting transcripts can now employ AI-based coding of metaphors and modality to gauge executive confidence; preliminary evidence suggests such text metrics correlate with organizational strategy and investment patterns (Tang, 2024).

One emerging thread is the sociolinguistic nature of LLMs. Researchers like Grieve et al. (2025) emphasize that large language models “in general are inherently modelling varieties of language”, that is, they encode regional dialects, styles, and registers from their vast training data. This aligns well with discourse theory, which argues that organizational language reflects social identity and power structures. In this case, LLMs are effectively learning these socio-cultural scripts. In practice, many studies have begun to address this issue from an interdisciplinary perspective: for instance, Wang (2024) use LLMs to analyze corporate earnings call narratives across countries, revealing shifts in moral framing related to global ESG trends (Senni et al., 2025). Such work

unites organizational storytelling, discourse differentiation (Denning, 2005) with computational capacity.

Yet gaps remain. Studies like Cornelissen et al., (2024) and Dvorak et al. (2025) are among the first to theorize LLMs' role in management, but a broader conceptual framing is needed. In particular, there is an opportunity to integrate: (1) discourse-based management research, (2) computational text analytics, and (3) pragmatics of human–AI interaction. For example, insights from critical discourse analysis, which emphasize that language perpetuates power structures, can be extended to AI-mediated settings: how might LLM-generated narratives reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies? Likewise, agentic conceptions of AI suggest LLMs themselves participate in organizational sensemaking. Indeed, Dvorak et al. (2025) warn of adverse reactions when LLMs are mistaken for human experts, implying ethical and epistemic complexities.

Generative AI (especially LLMs) has begun to attract scholarly attention in management and organization studies. A recent editorial essay by Cornelissen et al. (2024) argued that LLMs might “support theoretical development in organization studies, offering unique conceptual frameworks”. Empirical work is still nascent, but trends are visible: firms increasingly integrate AI into decision support, marketing, HR, and innovation processes. Organizations are deploying generative AI not only to parse customer sentiment and automate reporting, but also to optimize operational logistics, supply chain planning, and executive decision support systems. LLMs can therefore be seen as “linguistic actors”, insofar as they produce, reframe, and circulate discourse within organizations. Rather than only classifying existing text, they generate new narratives, metaphors, and formulations that can shape managerial communication and decision-making. For example, analyses of board meeting transcripts can now employ AI-based coding of metaphors and modality to gauge executive confidence; preliminary evidence suggests such text metrics correlate with organizational strategy and investment patterns (Tang, 2024).

One emerging thread is the sociolinguistic nature of LLMs. Researchers like Grieve et al. (2025) emphasize that large language models in general are inherently modeling varieties of language, that is, they encode regional dialects, styles, and registers from their vast training data. This aligns well with discourse theory, which argues that organizational language reflects social

identity and power structures. In this case, LLMs are effectively learning these socio-cultural scripts. In practice, many studies have begun to address this issue from an interdisciplinary perspective: for instance, Wang (2024) use LLMs to analyze corporate earnings call narratives across countries, revealing shifts in moral framing related to global ESG trends (Senni et al., 2025). Such work unites organizational storytelling, discourse differentiation (Denning, 2005) with computational capacity.

Yet gaps remain. Studies like Cornelissen et al., (2024) and Dvorak et al. (2025) are among the first to theorize LLMs' role in management, but a broader conceptual framing is needed. In particular, there is an opportunity to integrate: (1) discourse-based management research, (2) computational text analytics, and (3) pragmatics of human–AI interaction. For example, insights from critical discourse analysis, which emphasize that language perpetuates power structures, can be extended to AI-mediated settings: how might LLM-generated narratives reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies? Likewise, agentic conceptions of AI suggest LLMs themselves participate in organizational sensemaking. Indeed, Dvorak et al. (2025) warn of adverse reactions when LLMs are mistaken for human experts, implying ethical and epistemic complexities.

The phenomena observed in generative AI research reflect a broader paradigmatic shift in empirical inquiry, as researchers engage with vast, dynamic, and computationally mediated data in ways that challenge traditional positivist assumptions (Knight et al., 2022). Earlier forms of empiricism, including logical and empirical positivism, emphasized hypothesis-driven research, controlled observation, and the falsifiability of theories (Popper, 1957; Kageyama, 2003). However, advances in technology enabled positivist approaches to extend these principles, enhancing rigor, confidentiality, and data handling in organizational research. As such, the rise of digital empiricism represents a significant development in this trajectory, extending classical empiricist commitments into a computational age while also prompting reflection on traditional assumptions about objectivity and value-neutrality.

Digital empiricism emerges in response to the scale and complexity of contemporary data environments where large datasets and computational tools transform how researchers engage with evidence as part of empirical inquiry

(Knight et al., 2022). This is not a break from prior empirical traditions; rather, it is a recalibration. Digital empiricism retains the empiricist commitment to grounding knowledge in observation and evidence but may modify the methods and analytical reasoning used to generate and interpret those observations.

A central distinction between digital and classical empiricism is the role of the data itself. In digital empiricism, data are not only evidence to test pre-existing hypotheses but also serve as a starting point for exploratory inquiry. Due to the unprecedented rise of digitalization, researchers increasingly work with large, unstructured datasets that allow patterns, correlations, and anomalies to surface without reliance on predefined theoretical frameworks. This encourages inductive approaches, where theory may develop in response to insights emerging from the data. Computational models and algorithmic tools further enhance this process by detecting subtle patterns at scale, often inspiring new theoretical directions.

In this sense, digital empiricism offers an alternative approach to studying phenomena, shaped by both technological affordances and novel epistemological possibilities. Rather than replacing earlier paradigms, it builds on them, expanding the repertoire of methods and perspectives available to researchers in the era of generative AI.

This evolution can also be situated within the broader Kuhnian concept of paradigms. While Kuhn (2009) focused on transformations in the natural sciences, his idea of paradigms, as shared frameworks of assumptions, values, and practices, remains relevant for understanding changes in empirical research. The rise of data-intensive, computational research exemplifies such a shift. It does not discard previous modes of knowledge but rather broadens the epistemic tools and approaches available to scientific communities.

The growth of data-intensive research also complicates the traditional distinction between facts and values. Computational science positions value-laden decisions as central to the research process. These decisions are particularly relevant in contexts where data equivalence must be maintained across different languages, as highlighted by Chidlow et al. (2014). Ensuring equivalence is not merely a technical concern, it reflects interpretive judgments

about what counts as valid, relevant, and meaningful data, especially when terms, concepts, or idioms do not translate neatly across linguistic contexts. Such judgments are central to methodological credibility.

In digitally mediated research, both computational tools and human decisions interact to shape outcomes, meaning that considerations of equivalence, translation choices, context, and interpretive framing are inseparable from epistemic and ethical choices (Knight et al., 2022). For instance, an algorithm trained primarily on English corpora may misrepresent or oversimplify discourse in other languages, raising questions of bias and representational fairness. From selecting data and designing algorithms to interpreting outputs, researchers face choices that reflect epistemic, ethical, social, and political considerations. Issues such as privacy, fairness, interpretability, cross-language comparability, and accountability are central to the credibility of knowledge. The reliance on opaque or proprietary algorithms further challenges conventional standards like reproducibility and falsifiability, prompting a re-examination of what counts as objective and reliable evidence.

Importantly, these developments do not signal a rejection of empirical rigor or positivist traditions. Instead, they reflect an evolution in scientific practice, where values, both epistemic and non-epistemic, are acknowledged as integral to research within data-intensive, computational contexts. These approaches introduce new methods, tools, and dilemmas while continuing to ground claims in observable evidence, representing a recalibrated and technologically informed form of inquiry suited to contemporary research environments.

Generative AI and large language models exemplify this shift. They do not merely classify existing information but produce, reframe, and circulate discourse, revealing patterns that might not have been anticipated. Studying LLMs in organizational contexts represents a move toward a situated, reflexive, and contextually nuanced epistemology, in which AI functions both as a tool and as an agent shaping knowledge. This aligns with the broader data-driven paradigm shift, illustrating how contemporary organizational research increasingly integrates computational, linguistic, and epistemological innovation.

Conceptual Framework

We propose a multilevel, processual framework linking GenAI affordances to organizational discursive transformations and outcomes, moderated by organizational context. At the micro level are the linguistic features of discourse: words, syntax, sentiment, metaphor, modality, etc. Using LLMs, researchers can code or generate text to quantify these micro-elements automatically. For instance, an earnings-call Q&A transcript can be parsed for epistemic modality (hedges, certainty) to infer managerial confidence; early work shows such modality shifts predict innovation announcements. At the meso level are discursive routines and genres, e.g. strategy narratives, sensemaking meetings, annual reports. GenAI enables creation and experimentation with these routines: for example, researchers could prompt a GPT-based agent to play a CEO creating a vision statement, and observe how slight changes in language affect simulated stakeholder reactions. At the macro level are organizational outcomes like performance, trust, or innovation rate. Our framework posits that shifts at the micro and meso levels (e.g. more direct language, new metaphors) impact these outcomes, potentially mediated by factors such as company culture, AI-readiness, and governance. To operationalize this, Table 1 outlines illustrative LLM capabilities and research applications.

Table 1. Examples of using LLM/generative AI capabilities for organizational discourse research

AI Capability	Organization Research Use	Example
Text Generation	Scenario prototyping, counterfactual simulations	Use GPT agents to simulate boardroom discussions under different strategies (e.g., varying vision statements)
Contextual Classification	Automated coding of discourse (sentiment, topics, speech acts)	Classify internal chat logs by speech act (request, complaint) to study group norms
Agentic Simulation	Emergent interactions & norms (multi-agent dialogues)	Instantiate LLM personas (CEO, engineer, HR) in simulation to see how discourse evolves and how policies might form
Translation & Paraphrasing	Cross-cultural communication analysis	Generate translated or style-shifted versions of employee feedback to examine inclusion
Dialogue Systems	Mixed human-AI interviews or surveys	Use conversational AI to conduct qualitative interviews, or to help code responses with AI-assist

Source: Authors’ own elaboration.

These capabilities make novel methods possible. For example, one could assemble a synthetic corpus combining internal memos, public filings, and AI-generated scenarios, then apply few-shot LLM prompts to annotate discourse patterns. Or one could use LLMs as collaborative co-researchers: for instance, pose theoretical questions to GPT (aided by human oversight) and compare its outputs across model versions as a form of exploratory theorizing (Cornelissen et al., 2024).

Conceptually, the flow can be depicted as: GenAI affordances ⇒ Discursive transformations ⇒ Organizational capabilities ⇒ Outcomes, with organizational

readiness factors (strategic alignment, culture, IT infrastructure, employee skills) moderating these relationships. For instance, a firm with high AI literacy (readiness) may rapidly adopt clear, unambiguous AI-generated messaging, leading to faster decision-making, whereas a low-readiness firm may misinterpret AI suggestions, risking miscommunication.

The following research questions flow from this model:

- ⋮ RQ1: *How does the integration of GenAI into knowledge-work routines reshape discursive sensemaking among cross-functional teams?*
- ⋮ RQ2: *What linguistic markers in strategy documents differentiate successful from unsuccessful GenAI initiatives?*
- ⋮ RQ3: *How do LLM-mediated dialogues alter power dynamics in hierarchical versus flat organizational structures?*
- ⋮ RQ4: *Can simulated AI-agent interactions predict emergent governance norms in digital-native firms?*
- ⋮ RQ5: *Which organizational readiness factors (strategic, cultural, technical) most strongly moderate the effect of GenAI affordances on innovation outcomes?*

As generative AI becomes embedded in organizational research, it invites designs that transcend conventional methodological boundaries by combining computational, experimental, and interpretive approaches. In practice, research designs may adopt methodologically pluralistic pipelines that integrate computational scale with interpretive depth. For example, large-scale topic modeling across thousands of documents, complemented by GPT-mediated narrative simulations, and subsequently triangulated through interpretive case interviews. Such hybrid designs exemplify the emerging paradigm of *Algorithmic Discourse Research*, in which generative AI is mobilized as a discursive collaborator that enables new forms of methodological triangulation and epistemic pluralism.

Discussion

The proposed paradigm offers several contributions, including:

- 1) Theoretical contributions,
- 2) Methodological contributions,
- 3) Practical implications,
- 4) Ethical and epistemic considerations.

Theoretical contributions. GenAI recenters language in organization theory by recognizing language models as new organizational actors. Traditional discourse studies treated language as held by people; ADR treats algorithms as co-constructing discourse. This helps integrate sociolinguistics (language varieties, registers) with management. For instance, the finding that LLMs are inherently modeling varieties of language suggests we can quantitatively study dialect use in corporate narratives, linking back to theories of cultural diversity. More broadly, ADR may constitute a third epistemic path alongside quantitative and qualitative research. It allows hypothesis generation by simulation, not just testing, which is closer to abductive or design science methodologies.

Methodological contributions. Hybrid human, AI workflows are becoming a key innovation in organizational research and exemplify data-driven research in practice. For example, LLMs can pre-code sentiment, speech acts, or themes across thousands of emails, while human experts review and refine these labels. This combination ensures that patterns detected by AI remain accurate, meaningful, and appropriate, reflecting the balance between computational pattern generation and human interpretive judgment, a hallmark of data-driven inquiry. Another promising approach is agent-based linguistic simulation, where LLM-driven personas model employee behaviors or test organizational strategies before implementation.

This allows researchers to explore complex social interactions in a controlled yet flexible manner, extending traditional empirical methods through computational experimentation (Knight et al., 2022). Moreover, in linguistically sensitive research, these workflows raise distinctive challenges of equivalence.

As Chidlow et al. (2014) emphasize, ensuring that meanings remain valid across linguistic and cultural settings is not simply a technical issue but one bound up with interpretive and ethical choices. Data-driven research highlights how algorithmic tools may amplify or distort such issues, for instance, when corpora are dominated by English-language data or when cultural metaphors do not translate neatly. Human review therefore remains central to ensure that AI-enabled analysis does not flatten linguistic or cultural richness. By sharing prompt libraries and synthetic datasets, researchers also improve transparency, replicability, and reflexivity, making both the computational processes and interpretive choices explicit and open to scrutiny. Overall, this hybrid methodology combines the scale and efficiency of AI with the critical oversight of human researchers. It moves beyond purely manual coding or statistical NLP, illustrating how generative AI not only transforms methods but also reshapes the epistemological approach to organizational research, consistent with the principles of data-driven inquiry and the dynamic nature of meaning in language.

Practical implications. For managers, ADR offers early-warning indicators and process insights. For instance, AI analysis of internal chat could flag rising confusion (via rising interrogative usage) before it manifests in attrition. LLMs can generate role-based narratives to train teams on communication strategies. Importantly, ADR highlights readiness gaps. If our framework is correct, firms will find cognitive readiness (AI literacy, openness to new narratives) and cultural readiness (e.g., tolerance for algorithmic suggestions) to be critical enablers. The language-based indicators of adoption success might include decreasing modal hedges in strategy docs (a sign of growing confidence) or the emergence of metaphors (e.g., “digital twin”) which LLMs can help track. Governance implications are also evident: as firms deploy AI-generated content externally, transparency norms may require labeling and discourse standards (e.g., clear denotation of AI-generated reports).

Ethical and epistemic considerations. ADR extends classic discourse concerns into the AI era, foregrounding the complex interplay between computational tools, human judgment, and organizational context. Issues of authorship and originality are especially salient: who “owns” an AI-generated report? Akinwande et al. (2024) highlight how human and machine creativity merge, challenging

traditional notions of intellectual ownership. Data bias remains a critical concern. LLMs can reproduce or amplify racial, gender, or cultural biases unless carefully audited. Moreover, cross-language research introduces additional complexity: ensuring data equivalence across languages requires interpretive decisions that are inherently value-laden (Chidlow et al., 2014). The ADR thus emphasizes that computational outputs cannot be treated as neutral; context, human oversight, and reflexive interpretation shape what counts as valid and meaningful data. Transparency and reproducibility are equally central. When researchers analyze corpora of AI-generated or translated texts, disclosure of AI usage and methodological choices is necessary, echoing emerging journal policies (Organization Theory). A reflexive process operates as organizations adopt and internalize AI-generated narratives, which in turn reshape the discourse that constructs organizational life. For example, ChatGPT-generated training materials may shift educational or workplace culture, as Huovinen (2024) found in a business-school pilot. In sum, researchers must study a “moving target”: what Luhmann (1993, 1995) describes as second-order observation of language changes. ADR highlights that ethical, epistemic, and contextual considerations are inseparable: AI affordances, human interpretation, organizational context, and cross-language equivalence collectively determine the meaning, validity, and societal implications of research outputs.

A potential critique is that the ADR represents little more than a technologically fashionable extension of existing methods. Yet generative AI does not replicate prior approaches as it substantially extends the foundational aims of discourse analysis. Whereas traditional studies sought to elucidate how language constitutes power and meaning, large language models now enable this inquiry at unprecedented scale and depth. By processing billions of tokens and generating counterfactual or “what-if” dialogues, LLMs afford interactive experimentation with discursive dynamics that were previously accessible only through small-scale case studies. Moreover, the ability to generate multilingual corpora on demand makes it possible to study cross-cultural discourse with a level of detail and comparability that was previously out of reach. In this respect, generative AI may be understood as a natural progression of computational social science; one that places language at the center of organizational inquiry.

Conclusion

We have argued that generative AI heralds a new paradigm in organizational research by knitting together linguistics and management in novel ways. The once-separate streams of discourse analysis and information technology now converge. Generative AI and LLMs do not merely analyze language, but they create and mediate it. As such, they demand we reconceive our epistemology: language is no longer just a window on organization, but an actor in its own right. By foregrounding AI's linguistic affordances, we have outlined an agenda for the ADR. This agenda re-centers language (and its algorithmic generation) in theory-building, positioning the ADR alongside positivist and interpretive paradigms.

Importantly, the path ahead is collaborative and open-ended. We encourage scholars to develop open-science infrastructures (shared prompt repositories, synthetic benchmark corpora) to enable cumulative progress. Cross-cultural work is vital: multilingual LLMs can help de-center the Anglo-American bias in management discourse. We also urge investigation into co-agency: as organizations outsource tasks to LLMs, how do decision-making and creativity patterns change? For example, does having an AI collaborator in a strategic workshop democratize participation or reinforce existing power roles?

In practical terms, the marriage of linguistics and management through GenAI offers rich potential. Organizations may soon evaluate ESG commitments through AI-coded narratives, or predict cultural clashes by simulating multilingual team meetings. However, this future depends on careful guidance: managers and regulators should work with researchers to set standards for transparency, fairness, and accountability in AI-mediated language.

In conclusion, generative AI has ushered in a second linguistic turn: an era of algorithmic construction that redefines the relationship between language and organization. Embracing this shift offers scholars and practitioners not only sharper analytical tools but also the possibility of shaping more inclusive, innovative organizational futures. The horizon is no longer confined to studying language in organizations; it now extends to organizing with language models themselves. The challenge, and the opportunity, is to guide this transformation

wisely: grounding it in linguistic insight while unleashing the creative force of AI innovation.

Disclosure

We hereby declare that our scientific work was researched and written independently by us. We used only standard editing tools, such as language-correction functions in word processors, as well as our own notes and the scholarly literature necessary for preparing the text.

References

Ahinwande, M., Adeliyi, O., & Yussuph, T. (2024). Decoding AI and human authorship: Nuances revealed through NLP and statistical analysis. *International Journal on Cybernetics & Informatics*, 13(4), 85–103.

Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2000). Varieties of discourse: On the study of organizations through discourse analysis. *Human Relations*, 53(9), 1125–1149.

Bitzer, L. F. (1968). The rhetorical situation. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 1(1), 1–14.

Brzozowska, M., Kolasińska-Morawska, K., Sułkowski, Ł., & Morawski, P. (2023). Artificial-intelligence-powered customer service management in the logistics industry. *Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review*, 11(4), 109–121.

Chidlow, A., Plakoyiannaki, E. & Welch, C. (2014). Translation in cross-language international business research: Beyond equivalence. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 45(5), 562–582.

Cornelissen, J., Höllerer, M. A., Boxenbaum, E., Faraj, S., & Gehman, J. (2024). Large language models and the future of organization theory. *Organization Theory*, 5(1).

Creely, E. (2024). Exploring the role of generative AI in enhancing language learning: Opportunities and challenges. *International Journal of Changes in Education*, 1(3), 158–167.

Daud, A., Aulia, A. F., Muryanti, Harfal, Z., Nabilla, O., & Ali, H. S. (2025). Integrating artificial intelligence into English language teaching: A systematic review. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 14(2), 677–691.

Denning, S. (2005). *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Dvorak, F., Stumpf, R., Fehrler, S., & Fischbacher, U. (2025). Adverse reactions to the use of large language models in social interactions. *PNAS Nexus*, 4(4).

Fairclough, N. (2005). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman.

Fairhurst, G. T. (2011). *The Power of Framing: Creating the Language of Leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

Fairhurst, G. T., & Cooren, F. (2009). Leadership as the hybrid production of presence(s). *Leadership*, 5(4), 469–490.

Fairhurst, G. T., & Uhl-Bien, M. (2012). Organizational discourse analysis (ODA): Examining leadership as a relational process. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23(6), 1043–1062.

Giles, H. (1973). Communication accommodation theory. In *Language and social psychology* (pp. 103–114). Basil Blackwell.

Grieve, J., Bartl, S., Fuoli, M., Grafmiller, J., Huang, W., Jawerbaum, A., Murakami, A., Perlman, M., & Winter, B. (2025). The sociolinguistic foundations of language modeling. *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, 7, 1472411.

Grint, K. (2005). Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of leadership. *Human Relations*, 58(11), 1467–1494.

Grint, K. (2000). *The Arts of Leadership*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Anchor Books.

Holmes, P. (2006). Problematising intercultural communication competence in the pluricultural classroom: Chinese students in a New Zealand university. *Language and intercultural communication*, (6)1, 18–34.

Huovinen, L. (2024). Assessing usability of large language models in education. *Electronic Journal of Education Research*, OSF Preprint.

Ibarra-Colado, E. (2006). Organization studies and epistemic coloniality in Latin America: Thinking Otherness from the margins, *Organization*, 13(4), 463–488.

Jarco, D., Sułkowski, L. (2023). Is ChatGPT better at business consulting than an experienced human analyst? An experimental comparison of solutions to a strategic business problem. *Forum Scientiae Oeconomia*, 11(2), 87–109.

Kageyama, Y. (2003). Openness to the Unknown: The Role of Falsifiability in Search of Better Knowledge. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 33, 100–121.

Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692–724.

Knight, G., Chidlow, A., & Minbaeva, D. (2022). Methodological Fit for Empirical Research in International Business: A Contingency Framework. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 53(1), 39–52.

Kuhn, T. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lai, Z. (2025). The impact of AI-assisted blended learning on writing efficacy and resilience. *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching*, 15(1), 1–21.

Lehman, I. M., & Tienari, J. (2024). What do you mean? Linguistic sensitivity and relational reflexivity in scholarly writing. *Organization*, 32(3), 464–475.

Lehman, I. M., & Sułkowski, Ł. (2023). Reader perceptions of authorial voice in top-tier management journals: The case of doctoral students of management from Eastern Europe. *Journal of Management Education*, 47(4), 349–387.

Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social systems*. Stanford University Press.

Luhmann, N. (1993). Deconstruction as second-order observing. *New Literary History*, 24(4), 763–782.

Pack, A., & Maloney, J. (2023). Using generative AI for language education research: Insights from using OpenAI's ChatGPT. *TESOL Quarterly*, 57(4), 1571–1582.

Popper, K. (1957). *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Oxford: Routledge.

Schein, E. H. (1992). *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Senni, C., Schimanski, T., Bingler, J., Ni, J., & Leippold, M. (2025). Using AI to assess corporate climate transition disclosures. *Environmental Research Communications*, 7(2), 021010.

Spolsky, B. (2004). *Language Policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Tang, N. (2024). Leveraging big data and AI for enhanced business decision-making: Strategies, challenges, and future directions. *Journal of Applied Economic and Policy Studies*, 11(1), 25–29.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W.G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.

Wang, L. (2024). AI's role in endangered languages: Documentation and teaching. *Applied and Computational Engineering*, 48(1), 123–129.

Wei, L. (2023). Artificial intelligence in language instruction: Impact on English learning achievement, L2 motivation, and self-regulated learning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1261955.

Westwood, R. I., & Chan, A. (2001). The Transferability of Leadership Training in the East Asian Context. In Gannon, M.J. (Ed), *Cultural Metaphors: Readings, Research Translations, and Commentary* (pp. 203–230). Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE.

Zaki, M., & Ahmed, U. (2024). Bridging linguistic divides: The impact of AI-powered translation systems on communication equity and inclusion. *Journal of Translation and Language Studies*, 5(2).

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0013

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Janne Tienari

Hanken School of Economics, Finland

jtienari@hanken.fi

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2605-2760

Violetta Khoreva

Hanken School of Economics, Finland

violetta.khoreva@hanken.fi

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1118-9983

Through the Magic Lens: Management, Language, and AI

Article history:

Received 05 September 2025

Revised 10 November 2025

Accepted 11 November 2025

Available online 16 December 2025

Abstract: In this essay, we explore management, language, and artificial intelligence (AI). We highlight how management performs generative AI as magic and argue for the continued crucial role of humans under conditions of AI hype. We view language as an essential part of management to impress, to weave the illusion of expertise, and to manufacture our consent. We argue that performing AI as magic brings this into sharp relief, showing how power and ideology in and around AI operate when its advancement is constructed as inevitable. We encourage discussion on this and propose more research on resistance to management performing AI, on the gendered nature of AI and its consequences, and on AI-powered management clones and their language when agentic AI enters the stage. The magic lens offers a fruitful way forward in studying these fundamentally important topics.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, management, language, magic

Introduction

In this essay, we apply the lens of magic to explore management, language, and artificial intelligence (AI). How executives and managers—people at the top echelons of organizations—accomplish outcomes with language, often with problematic effects and dire consequences for others, is a crucial subject of inquiry. We argue that this is particularly timely and relevant under conditions of AI and the hype around it. However, while critical studies sensitive to language have uncovered the workings of power in management (for different ways, see e.g., Fischer & Alvesson, 2025; Jackall, 1988; Spicer, 2017), the seemingly inevitable progress of AI as a solution for everything today seems to be stifling language-based critique. The focus has shifted to technologies and their advancement, and critical work drawing on social sciences and humanities can be dismissed as outmoded by proponents of AI (Vesa & Tienari, 2022).

We see this lack of attention to the language of management under conditions of AI as deeply problematic because it ignores the continued crucial role of humans in organizations and workplaces. It also silences discussion

on the darker side of AI, for example, its lack of transparency (Hannigan et al., 2024) and its in-built biases (Manasi et al., 2022). The focus on technologies over humans is reflected in how AI is reshaping academic work, and it risks rendering research and writing acontextual, uncritical, and unreflexive (for critique, see e.g., Bechky & Davis, 2025; Larson et al., 2024; Lindebaum & Fleming, 2024).

To challenge these developments, we draw on the rich tradition of studying new technologies through the lens of magic (Gell, 1988; Kuhn et al., 2008). We look at generative AI as illusion rather than supernatural, although the distinction is often difficult to make when witnessing magic in action. We understand AI magic in management as “appearing to perform supernatural feats” (Tienari, 2025) and scrutinize how language contributes to these performances, rendering AI as taken for granted (cf., Fairclough, 1989). We hope to spur discussion on management performances that seek to secure our consent to “truths” about AI. The magic lens enables us to shed light on aspects of management, language, and AI that often pass unnoticed.

In the following, we first establish the case for critical scrutiny of management, language, and AI. We then outline our take on management and language, moving from a focus on management talk to performances where management engages with new technologies. Next, we specify our critical approach to language and power, focusing on the manufacturing of “truths”. We go on to introduce our magic lens and use it to interpret an illustrative example of management performing AI. Finally, we offer conclusions and provide ideas for future research.

Management under conditions of AI

Looking at management, language, and AI through the lens of magic is not as far-fetched as it may seem. Management is grounded in language, and it can be studied through discourses, narratives, stories, speech, talk, or whatever concept one prefers. Language helps executives and managers to get things done in ways that appear convincing in the eyes of key stakeholders. Through language, management can gather support for change; articulate visions and strategies

and solidify business models; excite and satisfy investors and customers; and engage employees. If magic is understood as creating senses of illusion (Kuhn et al., 2008), this seems inherent to management. Under conditions of AI hype, management language arguably takes magical forms—and the magic is driven by advancing technologies and their promises of success.

Today, no self-respecting executive or manager can ignore AI. A journalist for the Finnish daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (Wacker, 2025) followed company presentations for investors and noticed that executive-level AI talk today follows the same pattern: AI will transform the industry, the executive's company is at the apex of the development, and AI is thus more of an opportunity than a threat to them. The journalist lamented that AI is becoming an absolute value rather than a technology or tool for companies. He noted that executives present AI as *the* solution to everything. The risk, he said, is that organizations will not be developed in their entirety, but through the assumed benefits of AI.

Interestingly, a recent study by MIT claims that “despite \$30–40 billion in enterprise investment into GenAI [...] 95% of organizations are getting zero return” (MIT, 2025, p. 3). The authors describe a great divide where “just 5% of integrated AI pilots are extracting millions in value, while the vast majority remain stuck with no measurable P&L impact”. One aspect of this is that while AI is likely to increase productivity of individuals, this does not necessarily translate into organizational productivity. Of course, the magic of AI may be further perpetuated by such observations where it seems to benefit only the chosen few.

Unconditional AI talk is not coincidental. It reflects a fundamental shift where new technologies and AI in their multiple forms are sweeping through organizations, societies, and markets. Hype around AI is orchestrated by those who develop, sell, and invest in it, and it is sustained by media and researchers who are tempted to follow the money and fail to act as a check on industry power (Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024).

Also, there is not one AI but an endless number of AI technologies, tools, and applications. These are computer systems that can perform tasks that would traditionally be understood to require humans and their intelligence. Generative AI models are created using algorithms and training data, and

they learn from experiences. Popular tools such as ChatGPT are types of large language model (LLM) that respond to user prompts with AI-generated images, texts, or videos, simulating conversational interactions. They are based on sophisticated machine learning algorithms that have been trained on large data sets published on the Internet (see e.g., Jiang & Hyland, 2025).

AI is also a marketing term used by those who develop and sell these technologies to make others “believe that their technology is similar to humans, able to do things that [...] require human judgement, perception, or creativity” (Bender & Hanna, 2024, p. 5). Narayanan and Kapoor (2024) note that “consumer-facing AI has finally, after many, many decades, crossed the threshold of usefulness” (p. 166). However, they warn us against “AI snake oil”, referring to “AI that does not and cannot work as advertised” (p. 2). This is why there is a strong case for critical scrutiny of management and language under conditions of AI.

Management talk

Our essay is grounded on the premise that language does not merely describe the world but helps to socially construct it. While this is nothing new to linguists and social scientists, most mainstream management, technology, and AI theorists continue to downplay or ignore the power of language. Yet, mastering the “right” language has always been a fundamentally important part of management. It helps those who manage to navigate the complexities of their everyday work clouded by ambiguity, incomplete information, multiple points of view, and conflicting responsibilities (Andrews, 1989). Jackall (1988) talked about “moral mazes” in management. He elucidated how moral consciousness is shaped in a corporate world where “instead of ability, talent, and dedicated service to an organization, politics, adroit talk, luck, connections, and self-promotion are the real sorters of people into sheep and goats” (ibid., p. 3). Jackall (1988) concluded that successful managers are “dexterous symbol manipulators” and that “adroit talk” is a crucial part of their work.

Scholars have also noted that the language of management is selective and at times only loosely coupled with what is done in practice (see e.g., Fischer

& Alvesson, 2025). Management talk tends to be (overly) positive: drawing people's attention to positive aspects of what ought to be happening and providing positive interpretations of what seems to be happening. This leads to gaps between talking and doing. Fischer and Alvesson (2025) argue that these gaps are systemic. The key is not whether management talk is truthful or deceptive—it is about responding to systemic pressures and opportunities, and it offers “egocentric, psycho-relational, and public-image benefits” for those doing the talking (p. 1).

Of course, these insights seem to suggest that talking is not doing. For us, talking is at the very heart of doing or performing management. This is what makes management language and talk fascinating—and prone to magic. Scholars have elucidated discrepancies in how management and employees in organizations experience and talk about AI (Einola et al., 2024). Executives and managers embrace the future, use bold discourse, and talk about substituting humans with technologies. Employees often inhabit a different reality, where they are forced to grapple with the present, struggle to make progress in practice, and continuously meet new demands at work (ibid.).

At the same time, management talk tends to be complex and filled with jargon. This is because everyone wants a piece of it: current and potential owners and investors, clients and customers, employees, competitors, politicians, policymakers, and social media influencers. The list is endless. Complex and at times ambiguous management talk is needed, it seems, for navigating complex spaces that are filled with contrasts, contradictions, tensions, and struggles. Management talk aims to impress and to give the impression (or illusion) of expertise and control (Laine et al., 2016)—and it allows one to blather on without saying much that is worthwhile. Spicer (2017) argues that management talk can be bullshit. Bullshit is talk that is intended to persuade without regard for the truth (Frankfurt, 2005).

Spicer (2017) shows how bullshit as “empty talk” helps management dodge tough questions and rally support for “hollow change” that is constantly discussed but often meaningless. Even if executives and managers know that turning to bullshit is probably not the best idea, they may feel compelled to do it. And the more they do it, the more naturally it can flow. Soon, executives and

managers may start to think that empty words will trump reasonable reflection and considered action. Sadly, this often seems to be the case. Spicer (2017) concludes that bullshit empties out language and makes management less able to think clearly and soberly about the real issues. This is why management talk can sometimes be not only “adroit” (Jackall, 1988) or “empty” (Spicer, 2017) but dangerous, too.

Peppering management talk with AI is an example. However, exploring management and language in conditions of AI arguably calls for a more comprehensive understanding where language is viewed as performative, and talk is intertwined with managerial bodies and technologies.

Management performances

In studying management, language, and AI, we broaden our view from talk to performances. First, executives and managers are not what they used to be—and their appearance is different—and this is reflected in the talk. They have turned into trimmed managerial athletes whose bodies and movements radiate energy and stamina (Johansson et al., 2017; Meriläinen et al., 2015). Gone are the double chins and wobbly stomachs that once signified management status and affluence. Managerial athletes today have no time for boozy lunches and long dinners. They exercise and train, keep a strict diet, and monitor their sleep. They perform managerial athleticism effectively and efficiently, making sure that they are at the top of their game every day. They are on an eternal quest for fitness and wellness (cf., Cederström & Spicer, 2015).

Second, technologies have become a crucial part of management performances. Long before AI, technologies enabled executives and managers to optimize, improve, and impress. Technological gadgets are ever more sophisticated and they offer new ways to measure and monitor the self and others. Applications in smart phones, watches, and rings persuade executives and managers to optimize their bodily functions and to take their “self-improvement” to new heights (Cederström & Spicer, 2017). Executives and managers with healthy and fit bodies routinely engage in talk that embraces

the opportunities offered by advancing technologies to the extent that it can be argued that management performances today are technologized. They are enabled by technologies—and they increasingly take place on digital platforms that help make them instantly viral. As the AI hype testifies, management performances are also increasingly *about* technologies.

Advancing technologies unleash human creativity in setting standards, measuring, and assessing how we—and, crucially, others—behave and perform in organizations. Executives and managers tend to be driven people and they cherish competition and competitiveness. AI-powered tools and technological gadgets encourage competition as well as measurement, and social media and other technology-enabled platforms provide spaces for sharing “results” and comparing them with those who matter. There are thus endless new opportunities for impressing others. This underlines how management is commonly portrayed as omnipotent, visionary, and in control (Laine et al., 2016), and how its language and performances reflect these ideals.

In all, viewing management as performances, we extend understandings of language beyond what is said and written. This includes managerial bodies as well as the visual and aesthetic and, crucially, the technologies that enable management to be performed in new ways. Under conditions of AI and the hype around it, scrutinizing management performances arguably calls for a critical focus on language and power.

Language and power: Looking at management and AI critically

Building on the premise that language helps to construct the world and that it is performative, we adopt a critical perspective. Our focus is on how management uses language and engages in performances to advance their own interests (and the interests of the companies they represent), often against the interests of those who are not beneficial for the management agenda. It follows from this that we understand language to be related to power or, more precisely, that language use is connected to unequal relations of power in organizations

and society (Fairclough, 1989). Following Fairclough's ideas, we explore how language contributes to the domination of some over others, in other words, how language arises out of specific relations of power and how it gives rise to these very relations when management is performed with talk, embodiment, and technologies.

Fairclough's (1989) interest in theorizing ideology is noteworthy here. His take on how ideology works in and through language to reproduce taken-for-granted assumptions and understandings and "truths" is valuable for unmasking management language and what it does under conditions of AI hype. When something becomes considered as "common-sense", we think, critical scrutiny is needed. How management is performed in the name of AI is an example, and how this is related to unequal power relations is a crucial question. We focus on how power is exercised through the manufacture of consent. Fairclough (1989) reminds us that its primary means is ideology. We are interested in the workings of power in management performances; how management language is embedded in embodied and technologized performances that make us believe that AI can achieve what is envisioned.

Forms and consequences of developing and using AI are already visible in organizations. Research tells us, for example, that AI interacts with humans in decision-making and problem solving (Murray et al., 2021), and that it influences management team dynamics (Vuori, 2025) and strategic choices in organizations (Krakowski et al., 2023; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). AI stirs emotions and interaction (Einola et al., 2024) as well as trust among organizational members (Vuori et al., 2025). As observed in a study in financial services, AI relieves customer advisors of routine tasks, leaving them with more complex queries that can cause stress, especially as their performance is measured by daily query volume (Einola et al., 2025). While customer advisors turned AI trainers may see their roles as an upgrade, their new position risks obsolescence once AI becomes sufficiently intelligent (ibid.). The power of AI thus operates through multiple ways involving humans across organizational hierarchies. In our view, its language warrants more critical scrutiny.

In all, looking at management performances critically means that we explore power in performing AI. How humans and technologies are intertwined is not

a new question (Einola & Khoreva, 2023; Orlikowski, 2005) but under conditions of AI it attains new meanings (Scarbrough et al., 2024). AI pushes management to perform—and to convince and impress us—in unforeseen ways. A bit of magic seems to be needed in management performances.

Through the magic lens

Magic is a way of dealing with the world by trying to achieve something by doing something else. The concept is multifaceted (Bailey, 2006) but it is associated with illusion and the supernatural, and it straddles our social realities and fantasies. In Obadia's (2022) words magic “injects the extraordinary into the ordinary”. Crucially, magic feeds on our assumptions. As illusion, it is grounded in the magician's ability to control attention, distort perception, and influence choice (Kuhn et al., 2008; Truitt, 2015). Magic produces a sense of wonder and skilled magicians can manipulate our assumptions, leading to a result that seems inconsistent with what is occurring. Part of the magic is that we are kept in suspense as to what we will witness and experience next (Kuhn et al., 2008.).

In many fields of research, AI is likened to magic. AI represents new technologies through which magic can be expressed (Davis, 2015; Obadia, 2022). When interacting with humans, AI requires “some illusion of animacy and thought” (Sharkey & Sharkey, 2006). Viewing AI as magic is part of a long trajectory of critically discussing the magical features of technologies (see e.g., Gell, 1988; Leaver & Srdanov, 2023; Obadia, 2022). Societies and markets tend to set unrealistic expectations for technologies, and this is a major reason for likening them to magic (Stivers, 2001). Also, references to magic help signify the potential that AI holds for us (Francisco, 2015), for example, in dealing with our human desire to find connections, to understand complex phenomena, and to “address the fundamentally indeterminate condition of human existence” (Larsson & Viktorelius, 2024, p. 189).

One basis for its magic is that AI intrudes into our lives with a discourse that is oriented towards the future, offering promises of inevitable progress.

The powerful discourse of AI can be thought of as “unruly” (Lagerkvist & Reimer, 2023) and its capacity to straddle reality and fantasy combined with the future orientation fuels ever wilder representations of AI as magic. When we assume that AI is (like) magic, it helps us make sense of the world and imagine what could be (Tienari, 2025). Magic triggers “the hyped imagination of what is possible, not what is realistic” (Elish & Boyd, 2018, p. 58).

Because magic is about manipulating symbols—and about catching our attention and working on our assumptions—making AI appear magical is very much about language and performances (Tienari, 2025). For AI magic to materialize, however, audiences must believe that AI will deliver on the promises made in its name. In their performances, AI magicians rely on audiences who become complicit in magical acts and in amplifying AI hype (*ibid.*). Keeping up the hype is necessary to repeatedly capture our interest, allowing AI magicians to continue appearing to perform supernatural feats.

The problem with AI—and the basis for its magic—is that it is not transparent. AI-powered tools and technologies (and their algorithms and training data) remain opaque (Hannigan et al., 2024). The grounding for their capacity to shape and transform our practices often passes unnoticed (Lange et al., 2019). AI gets under our skin but often so subtly that we do not recognize its power over us—or even care about it (Tienari, 2025; Hannigan et al., 2024). As audiences, we become prey to management performances that are designed to convince us, and it is increasingly difficult to question what is sold to us in the name of AI. We end up reproducing taken-for-granted assumptions and “truths”. Power operates in and through magical management performances of AI, manufacturing our consent (*cf.*, Fairclough, 1989).

Although technologized management talk is often difficult to decipher, we must not take the magic performed in the name of AI at face value. AI algorithms are not free from biases but have learnt to efficiently automate them (Maaranen et al., 2022). They help AI tools to “automate bullshit”, as computer scientists Narayanan and Kapoor (2024) put it. In his critical take on business bullshit, Spicer (2017) reminds us that where there is demand, there is supply. Talking up change, transformation, and disruption requires a constant supply of new management fads and fashions. A massive industry of business bullshit

merchants has supplied these long before the present AI hype (Spicer, 2017). AI is not a fad or bullshit, of course, but bullshit can be manufactured and sold in its name. Hannigan et al. (2024) talk about “botshit”, drawing our attention to “untruthful content” produced by AI-powered tools—and uncritically used and spread by humans (p. 471).

As magic, then, opaque AI feeds on our assumptions and imagination. When the seemingly impenetrable workings of AI are the subject of media hype, its magical appearance is bolstered (Leaver & Srdanov, 2023). This paves the way for AI performances that are designed to draw our attention. While previous tech hype cycles have ended in some form of disappointment, we are persuaded to believe that now everything will be different—that we are living through a transformation where AI technologies will disrupt everything in our lives (for critical views, see e.g., Bender & Hanna, 2024; Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024; Tienari, 2025; Vesa & Tienari, 2022).

Welcome to the magic show!

To illustrate the arguments above, we present an example of how AI is performed as magic. This is not one of those mundanely magical management performances that characterize daily organizational life, but an event, spectacle, or magic show where a high-profile figure takes the stage to convince us of their views and visions. The Magician in question is a famous innovator and corporate executive and poster boy for AI that is accessible to all. He has established in media and social media the status of a visionary. In our example, he performs in a carefully staged and broadcast conversation with a professional host. A video of the conversation is publicly available online and AI offers a transcript of it alongside the video. The following vignette offers our interpretation of what happens in the conversation. We watched the video some four months after it was shared online, and by that time it had been viewed over two million times.

The Magician in action

Lights. Camera. AI. Action. Two white men sit on stage facing each other, with a low table between them. The conversation is carefully staged and performed. The younger man, The Magician, appears casually lean and fit, wearing a dark tight-fitting pullover, jeans, and sneakers. A bright spotlight is on the performers before a live audience, with big screens behind them. Several cameras film the performance, which is distributed through online channels. A local event becomes a global, viral performance enjoyed by viewers across time and place.

After the greetings, we are offered a cue for the performance. The host celebrates The Magician's company and its incredible products. The host is excited about how The Magician's AI tool generates images and videos. He tells us that he used the tool to create an image of his guest and himself. We are shown this image on the screen, and the audience laughs as they discover how it looks astonishingly like the two men. The host and The Magician joke about the AI-generated image. The host suggests that it is above average, and The Magician modestly agrees. The banter highlights its notably high quality.

The performance is in full swing. AI is performed, using the local venue amplified with global technologies to construct authority, vision, and legitimacy for millions of viewers. If this is an above average result for The Magician and his company, we can only imagine what new wonders are in store for us. The host continues with his exciting examples, and while the first was about what the AI tool can do visually, the next zooms in on its intelligence. The host shares his astonishment as he tells us how he asked for a diagram on a tricky subject and the AI tool obliged, creating an amazingly witty mix of text and image. The screen behind the two men shows the AI-generated outcome, and the audience remains silent. We witness something that is akin to a miracle, it seems, because the example shows intelligence in action.

The Magician casually responds by recounting the intelligence of his product and, with a modest smile, confirms that this is why people love it. The host quickly chips in and suggests that many professionals are uncertain about their future when AI can produce something like this. The Magician goes on to envision two very different views we can take. We can either worry about what is going to happen to us when AI does what we do, only better, or we can—like with every technological innovation in history—embrace it as something that helps us to do more and better ourselves. Much more is expected of humans, The Magician concludes, but AI enables us to develop our capabilities so that he is confident that we can rise to the occasion.

The host proceeds to share yet another example of what the AI tool can do, this one referring to a well-known comic character. He steers the conversation toward questions of intellectual and creative property rights, and the resistance to AI from human creative workers who may feel that AI tools steal their work. The Magician dodges criticism with skillful talk, constructing AI as inevitable and transformative. He performs AI as a force of progress and a tool that will redefine science, creativity, and even our personal identity. His language is visionary and optimistic. The Magician imagines a future that is desirable, constructing AI as benevolent and a force for good. The resisters' point of view is acknowledged and dismissed. We get a sense that they are old-fashioned, denying progress. With what we have just witnessed (and how we have engaged with AI in our lives, we can assume), it is hard to disagree with this.

The Magician envisions future AI as a companion and a lifelong assistant that will know us humans deeply and help us to be the best and do the best we can. He explains how AI will be embedded in our everyday lives so that it becomes both necessary and natural. The Magician claims that AI is a scientific catalyst and portrays it as a tool that will accelerate exciting discoveries in physics as well as software development, emphasizing how we are on an unbelievable and exponential learning curve. He downplays the risks associated with AI while highlighting the possibilities that we cannot even imagine today. The Magician constantly returns to security

concerns, but in a way that reinforces the mystique and awe of AI—yet, with a sense that he can be trusted—rather than challenges or seriously questions its invasion into every aspect of our lives.

When the host presses The Magician on agentic AI, or AI that is set free online to make decisions on its own, he calmly indicates that like with any new technology, people adjust. He takes the discussion back to how he and others at his company work relentlessly for safety and security. Judging by the clapping, the audience enjoys it when the host challenges The Magician on the dangers of letting agentic AI loose. They also seem to appreciate The Magician's sharp and convincing answers. The host encourages The Magician to reflect on his extraordinarily powerful position and asks whether he sees the risk of being corrupted by the lure of power and wealth. Again, The Magician dodges possible critique and, with a thoughtful expression, establishes himself as a visionary who is sensible and responsible.

The conversation ends on the same enthusiastic and reliable note. The host asks The Magician to envision the future world where his child will grow up. The Magician first looks back in time to earlier technological innovations, sharing a compelling example about a toddler who encountered a physical artifact that did not live up to their expectations of interactivity. The dull artifact seemed like a broken technological gadget, making the toddler annoyed. The toddler in the story seems to signify progress and the future, while adults signify inertia and the past. For adults, the technology back then was amazing because it was so new. It was like a miracle. For the toddler, it was just normal, how things are.

After again convincing us of the inevitability of technological advancement, The Magician looks into the future. With a serious expression, he envisions a world where AI outsmarts humans and where products and services are incredibly capable. He elaborates on a world where computers understand us humans and how this leads to material abundance. After these impressive words, The Magician predicts a rate of change that is astonishingly fast and a world where amazing new things happen all the time. He casually remarks that it will be beyond the ability of what anyone can do

today. The Magician then delivers a powerful punchline where he predicts that his child and others will look back at us with some nostalgia, pitying how we lived such limited lives. He envisions a fantastic future for us all.

Towards the end, one final time, the host celebrates The Magician, AI, and what they can do now and in the future. He uses words like incredible and unbelievable to show his enthusiasm for all the products that The Magician and his company have developed and shared with us. The host states that The Magician will face some of the greatest opportunities, moral challenges, and decisions to make that perhaps any human has ever faced. The host constructs The Magician once more as an extraordinarily powerful person who holds the key to our common future, it seems. The host concludes with a modest wish, begging The Magician to do the right thing. The Magician assures us that he will do his best. After the performers have thanked each other, we are left with a sense of awe. The performance is over for now, but we eagerly look forward to the next one.

Understanding the staged conversation as a magic show, we can see that The Magician's performance is not just about using language to tell us what AI can and will do. It is about imagining, convincing, and constructing a future for us that feels magical and desirable. With his examples of engaging AI, the host (and focal audience in the conversation) helps to stage The Magician. We witness with our own eyes what AI can do as The Magician and his company appear to perform supernatural feats. References to agentic AI further blur the line between reality and fiction, but in a way that arouses our curiosity and tickles our emotions, including excitement and anxiety, perhaps. The Magician's powerful position over our fate is bolstered.

At the same time, what AI can do is deeply visual and symbolic. The performance on stage is aesthetically designed to signal intellectual prestige, authority, and vision. The staging contributes to the magical aura of AI—embodied in The Magician who is lean and dynamic—with the help of large screens and AI-generated images and talk that is exciting and inspiring yet notably ambiguous. The host plays up The Magician's vision and powerful position and urges him to use it responsibly. He brings up The Magician's

unforeseen power over our future, as if begging him not to become an evil sorcerer. In the name of all, the host asks The Magician to do the right thing as if our fate seems to be in his hands.

All this creates a show that blends AI magic with The Magician's embodied presence, supported by an excited but mindful professional host. The Magician radiates energy and stamina, and he appears to be honest and sincere, with a clear sense of direction. What he says, how he says it, how he is staged, and who he becomes on stage all blend into his performance. We see two powerful men in the spotlight, embodying masculinity, whiteness, and techno-leadership. Their calm, serene, and confident posture and behavior symbolize control and rationality as well as excitement, responsibility, and visionary thinking. The host's behavioral style is professional and The Magician's sensible and down-to-earth, and together they contribute to a sense of credibility for an amazingly wide audience.

The stage for the magic show is grandiose, and the words are upbeat and often vague. The show, watched by millions, constructs a sense of inevitability about AI, without giving away its magic. The Magician's performance serves to assure us that we are in safe and secure hands, facing an unknown but exciting future full of opportunities for those of us who are ready and willing to seize them. As such, The Magician offers us an illustrative, powerful example of management, language, and AI. The fact that The Magician may change his mind, that his company's new products may not live up to the great expectations, or that he may be lured by power and wealth do not seem to matter. The sense of magic is so strong that we can forget about the downside of technologies. As the audience for The Magician's performance, we can use our imagination and get carried away.

Conclusion and future research

In this essay, we have focused on management and language by highlighting how generative AI is performed as magic. We have conceptualized management as performances and argued for the continued crucial role of humans under conditions of AI hype. Our point of departure has been that language continues

to be an essential part of management to impress, to weave the illusion of expertise, and to manufacture our consent to the inevitability of the future that is constructed (cf., Fairclough, 1989). We have argued that AI brings this into sharp relief and offered the magic lens to elucidate how management is performed. It seems to us that the inevitability of AI and its advancement is becoming the dominant ideology in organizations and society, vesting some of its magicians with a sense of extraordinary power.

We have aimed to spur discussion on studying management and language under these conditions. As management is technologized, and as AI in its myriad forms takes the world by storm, human-centered critique and a focus on language seem outmoded. This is how power and ideology in and around new technologies operate: their promise of inevitable progress is rendered taken-for-granted and critique is positioned as old-fashioned and irrational (Vesa & Tienari, 2022). Our consent is manufactured, often so subtly that we may fail to recognize what is happening (Tienari, 2025; Hannigan et al., 2024). By offering a language-based understanding of management and AI, we have sought to challenge this.

As a lens, magic has allowed us to shed light on the continued crucial role of human executives and managers as well as their audiences. This is important as magical performances of AI can lead to problematic outcomes. An increased divide between executives and managers, on the one hand, and employees, on the other, has attracted research attention (Einola et al., 2024). This has much to do with performances where management discursively operates in the future, excited, while others are forced to fill in the gaps in the present, often grudgingly (ibid.). The opacity of AI, sprinkled with a touch of magic, is problematic because it helps to mask its challenges and problems.

In this essay, we have not discussed resistance. Yet, resistance is an important avenue for future research on management performances of AI. Resistance is traditionally viewed as oppositional, and as refusal to submit to power, typically viewed as domination, oppression, or control. However, power and resistance can also be thought of as mutually constituting, following Foucault (1978), who claimed that “[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to

power” (pp. 95–96). If we understand power as something that operates through forms of knowledge, which establish regimes of truth in society (Foucault, 1980), then our complicity in management performances of AI deserves more research attention. Why is the magic of AI so difficult to resist? Why is our consent so easily manufactured?

Resistance ranges from overt (public or open) to more covert (hidden) forms. Mumby et al. (2017) identify forms of resistance that they term individual and collective infrapolitics, insubordination, and insurrection. Given the ubiquitous nature of AI and the sometimes extraordinarily powerful management performances, we turn attention to collective forms of resistance. Infrapolitics refers to “a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name” (Scott, 1990, p. 19). Infrapolitics can be “collective, yet quiet, disguised, hidden or anonymous” and serve “to challenge or unsettle the dominant discourse” (Mumby et al., 2017, p. 1167). Mobilizations of resistance to management performances of AI can remain “anonymous and under the radar”, yet be influential. Also, insurrection, or publicly declared collective resistance that embodies “different forms of mutuality with or without hierarchy” and is characterized by “lack of access to institutional channels” (p. 1170), is relevant under conditions of AI hype. Resistance can be highly visible, and it can challenge the status quo and envision alternatives to it.

For both infrapolitics and insurrection, we conclude with Mumby et al. (2017) that “resistance always needs to be understood contextually; what counts as resistance shifts with the economic, political, and socio-cultural terrain” (p. 1173). Management performances and AI magic—and resistance—operate differently in different contexts, and critical research must explore their varying conditions of possibility. Paradoxically, perhaps, this variety is another reason why it is so difficult to resist magical management performances through which AI is sold to us as inevitable. The magic is often skillfully tailored, and viral global performances like the example above blur our senses of context. AI magic must be studied in its many forms.

Further, when we consider that management and language are embedded in unequal gender relations in organizations and society, how inequalities are reproduced and bolstered under conditions of AI hype is an important subject of

inquiry. We suggest that more research sensitive to questions of gender is needed on management, language, and AI. Power relations in and around management are gendered and so, too, are embodied management performances (Johansson et al., 2017). At the same time, technologies have traditionally been associated with men and masculinity (Cockburn, 1985). Gender relations in society continue to materialize in technologies because designing, implementing, and using technologies rely heavily on social categories such as gender (Wajcman, 2010). This is evident in different forms of AI. Gendered biases manifest in how AI is developed, how datasets are trained, and how AI-generated decision-making plays out (Manasi et al., 2022). Most AI magicians are men. In the Global North, management is also predominantly white, and its dominant discourses and representations reflect this (Liu & Baker, 2015). How gender and race (including whiteness) intertwine in management performances under conditions of AI hype deserves more critical research attention.

There are also new questions awaiting us in the not-so-distant future. AI contributes to the blurring of offline and online realities and AI-powered “clones” are entering management. Many executives and managers are exploring these opportunities by letting AI carry out some of their tasks and duties in their name. More generally, we must critically study agentic AI that are autonomous AI systems, which require minimal human intervention and make decisions proactively. Important questions related to agentic AI include how humans interact and collaborate with them, and how they take increasing agency and impact on organizations (Korzynski et al., 2025). What must be noted again is that technological advancements are embedded in opacity and in discourse that constructs advancing AI as an inescapable trajectory to which humans have little say. The magic lens helps shed light on how new forms of agentic AI are sold to us, showcasing how social construction is intertwined with technology and pinpointing its problematic and perhaps detrimental consequences.

The scenario—celebratory or alarmist, depending on the viewpoint—is typical of future-oriented discourse surrounding new technologies (Fleming, 2019). Envisioning new opportunities for management clones and agentic AI is an example of how new technologies are sold to us as transformative and disruptive. While Haraway (1985) introduced the idea of the “cyborg” already in

the 1980s as a critical metaphor for fragmented identities and technological, bodily, and social realities, management performances have acquired a new twist with AI hype. How AI-powered clones perform management, how gender and race play into “their” performances, and how they can be resisted must be studied in detail. Magic is one lens through which linguistic and human aspects of management—intertwined with technologies—under these new conditions can be critically explored. AI challenges the idea of the managerial body as a human body. We suggest that language in management continues to matter even when we can no longer assume that managerial athletes who perform under conditions of AI hype are “real” humans. The magic of AI is taken to new heights when it is performed by non-humans. “Their” language and performances remain to be scrutinized.

Finally, we come back to The Magician and his host. In the conversation, The Magician shares his view of life after he became a father, talking seriously about his responsibility and his conviction to create the best possible future for all. This appears like a hopeful human message. However, in its vagueness it is part of the story that makes AI magical while downplaying the complex realities behind it and the adverse effects it may have on our lives. We believe that the language of management needs to be studied closely also from ethical perspectives under conditions of AI. The magic lens helps us to see through the illusions and apparently supernatural feats and ask tough questions. Most importantly, it allows us to critically explore whether the world being shaped by AI and its new incarnations aligns with the values we hold, to consider who holds the power to define those values and why, and to question and resist their ability to exercise power over us today and tomorrow.

References

- Andrews, K. R. (1989).** Ethics in practice. *Harvard Business Review*, September–October, 1–7.
- Bailey, M. (2006).** The meanings of magic. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 1(1), 1–23.

Bechky, B. A., & Davis, G. F. (2025). Resisting the algorithmic management of science: Craft and community after generative AI. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 70(1), 1–22.

Bender, E. M., & Hanna, A. (2024). *The AI con: How to fight big tech's hype and create the future we want*. London: The Bodley Head.

Cederström, C., & Spicer, A. (2015). *The wellness syndrome*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Cederström, C., & Spicer, A. (2017). *Desperately seeking self-improvement: A year inside the optimization movement*. New York: OR Books.

Cockburn, C. (1985). *Machinery of dominance: Women, men and technical know-how*. London: Pluto Press.

Davis, E. (2015). *TechGnosis. Myth, magic & mysticism in the age of information*. USA: North Atlantic Books.

Einola, K., & Khoreva, V. (2023). Best friend or broken tool? Exploring the co-existence of humans and artificial intelligence in the workplace ecosystem. *Human Resource Management*, 62(1), 117–135.

Einola, K., Khoreva, V., & Tienari, J. (2024). A colleague named Max: A critical inquiry into an anthropomorphised AI (ro)bot entering the workplace. *Human Relations*, 77(11), 1620–1649.

Einola, K., Khoreva, V., & Myllymäki, D. (2025). Boundary work, anyone? Exploring everyday encounters between Winnie the Bot and humans around it. In T. Pääkkönen & S. (Eds.), *Miettinen Boundary Spanning Design for Better Organisation*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Elish, M. C., & Boyd, D. (2018). Situating methods in the magic of big data and AI. *Communication Monographs*, 85(1), 57–80.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.

Fischer, T., & Alvesson, M. (2025). A theory of leadership meta-talk and the talking-doing gap. *Journal of Management Studies*, in press.

Fleming, P. (2019). Robots and organization studies: Why robots might not want to steal your job. *Organization Studies*, 40(1), 23–38.

Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: *An Introduction*. London: Lane.

Foucault, M. (1980). Truth and Power. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (pp. 109–133). New York: Pantheon Books.

Francisco, V. (2015). ‘The internet is magic’: Technology, intimacy and transnational families. *Critical Sociology*, 41(1), 173–190.

Frankfurt, H. G. (2005). *On bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Gell, A. (1988). Technology and magic. *Anthropology Today*, 4(2), 6–9.

Hannigan, T., McCarthy, I. P., & Spicer, A. (2024). Beware of botshit: How to manage the epistemic risks of generative chatbots. *Business Horizons*, 67(5): 471–486.

Haraway, D. (1985). A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s. *Socialist Review*, 80, 65–108.

Jackall, R. (1988). *Moral Mazes: The world of corporate managers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jiang, F., & Hyland, K. (2025). Does ChatGPT write like a student? Engagement markers in argumentative essays. *Written Communication*, 42(3), 463–492.

Johansson, J., Tienari, J., & Valtonen, A. (2017). The body, identity and gender in managerial athleticism. *Human Relations*, 70(9), 1141–1167.

Korzynski, P., Edwards, A., Gupta, M. C., Mazurek, G., & Wirtz, J. (2025). Humanoid robotics and agentic AI: Reframing management theories and future research directions. *European Management Journal*, 43(4), 548–560.

Krakowski, S., Luger, J., & Raisch, S. (2023). Artificial intelligence and the changing sources of competitive advantage. *Strategic Management Journal*, 44(6), 1425–1452.

Kuhn, G., Amlani, A. A., & Rensink, R. A. (2008). Towards a science of magic. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12(9), 349–354.

Lagerkvist, A. & Reimer, B. (2023). Bothering the binaries: Unruly AI futures of hauntings and hope at the limit. In *Handbook of Critical Studies of Artificial Intelligence*, ed. S. Lindgren (pp. 199–208). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Laine, P.-M., Meriläinen, S., Tienari, J., & Vaara, E. (2016). Mastery, submission and subversion: On the performative construction of strategist identity. *Organization*, 23(4), 505–524.

Lange, A.-C., Lenglet, M., & Seyfert, R. (2019). On studying algorithms ethnographically: Making sense of objects of ignorance. *Organization*, 26(4), 598–617.

Larson, B. Z., Moser, C., Caza, A., Muehlfeld, K., & Colombo, L. A. (2024). Critical thinking in the age of generative AI. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 23(3), 373–378.

Larsson, S., & Viktororius, M. (2024). Reducing the contingency of the world: Magic, oracles, and machine-learning technology. *AI & Society*, 39, 183–193.

Leaver, T., & Srdarov, S. (2023). ChatGPT isn't magic: The hype and hypocrisy of generative artificial intelligence (AI) rhetoric. *M/C Journal*, 26(5).

Lindebaum, D., & Fleming, P. (2024). ChatGPT undermines human reflexivity, scientific responsibility and responsible management research. *British Journal of Management*, 35(2), 566–575.

Liu, H., & Baker, C. (2015). White Knights: Leadership as the heroicisation of whiteness. *Leadership*, 12(4), 420–448.

Maaranen, A., den Hond, F., & Vesa, M. (2022). Social media and bias 2.0. In M. Sandberg & J. Tienari (Eds.), *Transformative Action for Sustainable Outcomes: Responsible Organising* (pp. 93–98). London: Routledge.

Manasi, A., Panchanadeswaran, S., Sours, E., & Lee, S.J. (2022). Mirroring the bias: Gender and artificial intelligence. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 26(3), 295–305.

Meriläinen, S., Tienari, J. & Valtonen, A. (2015). Headhunters and the 'ideal' executive body. *Organization*, 22(1), 3–22.

MIT (2025). *The GenAI divide: State of AI in business 2025*. MIT NANDA (Aditya Challapally, Chris Pease, Ramesh Raskar & Pradyumna Chari). Retrieved from https://mlq.ai/media/quarterly_decks/v0.1_State_of_AI_in_Business_2025_Report.pdf. Accessed 24 November 2025.

Mumby, D. K., Thomas, R., Martí, I., & Seidl, D. (2017). Resistance redux. *Organization Studies*, 38(9), 1157–1183.

Murray, A., Rhymer, J., & Sirmon, D. G. (2021). Humans and technology: Forms of conjoined agency in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 46(3), 552–571.

Narayanan, A. & Kapoor, S. (2024). *AI snake oil: What artificial intelligence can do, what it can't, and how to tell the difference*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Obadia, L. (2022). (Online) spelling the (digital) spell: Talking about magic in the digital revolution. *Sophia*, 61, 23–40.

Orlikowski, W. J. (2005). Material works: Exploring the situated entanglement of technological performativity and human agency. *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, 17(1), 183–186.

Raisch, S., & Krakowski, S. (2021). Artificial intelligence and management: The automation-augmentation paradox. *Academy of Management Review*, 46(1), 192–210.

Scarbrough, H., Chen, Y., & Patriotta, G. (2024). The AI of the beholder: Intra-professional sensemaking of an epistemic technology. *Journal of Management Studies*, 62(5), 1885–1913.

Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sharkey, N., & Sharkey, A. (2006). Artificial intelligence and natural magic. *Artificial Intelligence Review*, 25, 9–19.

Spicer, A. (2017). *Business bullshit*. New York: Routledge.

Stivers, R. (2001). *Technology as magic: The triumph of the irrational*. New York and London: Continuum.

Tienari, J. (2025). Learning about artificial intelligence? Cluelessness, courage, and magic in facing a moving target. *Management Learning*, in press.

Truitt, E. R. (2015). *Medieval robots: Mechanism, magic, nature, and art*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Vesa, M., & Tienari, J. (2022). Artificial intelligence and rationalized unaccountability: Ideology of the elites? *Organization*, 29(6), 1133–1145.

Vuori, N. (2025). Generative AI in strategy work and firm performance. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 1.

Vuori, N., Burkhard, B., & Pitkäranta, L. (2025). It's amazing—but terrifying! Unveiling the combined effect of emotional and cognitive trust on organizational member' behaviours, AI performance, and adoption. *Journal of Management Studies*, in press.

Wacker, H. (2025). Montako minuuttia johtaja pystyy olemaan puhumatta tekoälystä? *Helsingin Sanomat*, June 30, 2025. [How many minutes can an executive avoid talking about AI?].

Wajcman, J. (2010). Feminist theories of technology. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34(1), 143–152.

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0014

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Gabriela Philipp

WSB University, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Poland

gabriela.philipp@futurised.de

ORCID ID: 0009-0001-5494-6972

Łukasz Sułkowski

Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland

lukasz.sulkowski@uj.edu.pl

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1248-2743

Generative AI and
Generation Z: Redefining
Language, Identity, and
Communication in the Digital
Workplace

Article history:**Received** 03 November 2025**Revised** 29 November 2025**Accepted** 08 December 2025**Available online** 16 December 2025

Abstract: This paper examines the intersection of Generation Z, artificial intelligence (AI), and workplace communication, focusing on how digitalization is reshaping professional discourse, leadership, and identity. As the first fully digital-native cohort, Generation Z operates within hybrid work environments increasingly mediated by AI-driven tools such as ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot. These technologies influence tone, feedback, and collaboration, enhancing efficiency while simultaneously challenging authenticity, empathy, and intergenerational understanding. Gen Z's communicative repertoire—marked by multimodality, informality, and visual semiotics such as emojis, memes, and abbreviations—serves both identity construction and peer bonding. Through a narrative review, the paper explores work values, collaboration preferences, and adaptive communication styles, emphasizing the importance of aligning communicative norms with the expectations of emerging generations. As a conclusion, it argues that AI functions not merely as a productivity enhancer but as a transformative linguistic force, demanding that workplaces balance technological fluency with inclusivity, relational connection, and ethical communication practices.

Keywords: Generation Z, Artificial Intelligence, workplace communication, digitalization, generative AI

Introduction

“Information is the oxygen of the modern age”, Yuval Noah Harari famously remarked. For much of human history, creativity—particularly expressed through

written and spoken language—was considered uniquely human. Recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) challenge this assumption. AI systems now generate text, images, and other media that are often indistinguishable from human output (Feuerriegel et al., 2024). As AI diffuses rapidly into professional environments, it is transforming not only how tasks are performed but also how individuals communicate, lead, and negotiate identity in increasingly digitalized workplaces.

Unlike prior technological innovations designed to enhance human capabilities, AI systems possess a degree of autonomy: they process and analyze information, make decisions, and generate new ideas and concepts without direct human intervention (Harari, 2024). Broadly, AI is defined as “intelligent systems with the ability to think and learn” (Jarrahi, 2018). Wang (2019) frames intelligence as “adaptation under conditions of insufficient knowledge and resources”, highlighting AI’s capacity for flexible learning, though Dahlke (2024) critiques dominant definitions for neglecting linguistic and human dimensions of intelligence. Within this domain, generative AI (GenAI) refers to systems that produce novel content—text, visuals, or audio—based on extensive training data (Feuerriegel et al., 2024). Yet, uncertainties persist due to the lack of a unified definition (García-Peñalvo & Vázquez-Ingelmo, 2023). Ronge et al. (2025) identify four dimensions—multimodality, interactivity, flexibility, and productivity—that capture the complexity of GenAI. Increasingly, these systems are treated as interactive agents rather than passive tools, engaging in reciprocal relationships with human communicators (Bianchini, 2025).

Large Language Models (LLMs) underpin many generative AI systems, learning statistical patterns among words to produce coherent, contextually relevant outputs. Applications like ChatGPT now generate text, code, and visuals, reshaping professional communication and knowledge work (McKinsey & Company, 2023). While AI enhances creativity and decision-making (Jarrahi, 2018; Sharma & Tiwari, 2023), it also raises concerns about technostress, job insecurity, and overreliance on automation—challenges to workers’ cognitive and emotional capacities (Sharma & Tiwari, 2023). Futurist Ray Kurzweil predicts human-level AI intelligence by 2029, with exponential progress thereafter. Regardless of the exact timeline, it is evident that AI represents a lasting force in work discourse.

As we consider AI's impact on workplace discourse, it is crucial to distinguish between different modes of communication. Workplace communication encompasses both spoken, face-to-face interactions and written, digitally mediated exchanges (Koester, 2010). Notably, the advent of generative AI predominantly influences the written and digitally mediated side of this spectrum—emails, chats, documents—by offering content suggestions or even fully generated text. Face-to-face oral communication, by contrast, remains rooted in human spontaneity and nonverbal cues, with only indirect AI influence (e.g. real-time translation tools or AI-enhanced video conferencing). This paper will primarily focus on the latter category of written digital discourse, where AI's linguistic intervention is most pronounced, while acknowledging that in-person dialogue retains an essential role in building trust and rapport. In fact, organizational communication today is becoming gradually less formal and increasingly resembles discourse that occurs in private settings, partly due to the proliferation of digital channels across all communication forms. These trends pose new challenges—such as managing multilingual communication, cultural differences, and varying workplace norms in a technology-saturated environment (Lifintsev & Wellbrock, 2019). Not all workplace interaction is transactionally focused on tasks; much of it remains relationally oriented exchange aimed at fostering connection. In the AI era, achieving the right balance between efficiency and human warmth in each mode of communication becomes a key concern.

Generation Z and Workplace Discourses

Generation Z, generally defined as individuals born between 1995 and 2010, represents the first generation to mature fully in a digital and algorithmic world (Bencsik et al., 2016; Bejtkovsky, 2016). Twenge (2023) refers to them as “iGen”, reflecting their smartphone-era upbringing, while the label “Zoomers” highlights their immersion in virtual interactions (notably via Zoom and other platforms) during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, Millennials and

Gen Z account for approximately 38% of the global workforce, a figure projected to rise to 58% by 2030 (PwC study, 2020).

As digital natives, Gen Z has developed a communication style characterized by constant connectivity, multimodality, and irony (Turner, 2015; Hossli et al., 2024). They navigate workplaces mediated by AI-driven tools that generate content, feedback, and even leadership messages (Yang et al., 2024). Despite their technological fluency, many members of this generation may lack the strategic digital literacy required for long-term career development (Hammad, 2025). Their online identities are co-constructed via platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, where cultural norms, linguistic innovation, and community values are continuously remixed (Parsakia et al., 2023). These formative experiences shape how Gen Z expects to communicate and be communicated with in professional settings.

Research indicates that Generation Z values flexibility, autonomy, and meaningful work, yet also seeks in-person connection—a desire amplified by the isolation many experienced during the pandemic (Katz et al., 2021; Becker, 2022). Even when assigned individual tasks, Gen Z employees often prefer to complete them within a group context, reflecting a desire for collaboration and shared engagement. This duality—virtual fluency alongside a craving for authentic belonging—defines their communication preferences. Digital technologies expand opportunities for global collaboration, yet they can also risk diminishing the interpersonal and cross-generational communication skills fundamental to strong leadership and cohesive teamwork.

Within this context, workplace discourse has gained renewed importance. Koester (2010) defines workplace discourse as “spoken and written interaction occurring in a workplace setting”, while Cooren et al. (2014) emphasize its role in constructing organizational processes and shaping identities. The coexistence of four generations in today’s workforce potentially introduces linguistic and cultural tensions, as each cohort brings distinct communication norms, values, and expectations. Workplace communication spans interactions with clients, colleagues, and other stakeholders, described variously as institutional talk, professional discourse,

organizational communication, or business communication (Koester, 2010). Discourse combines and integrates “language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing and using various symbols, tools and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (Gee, 1999). Professional discourse is often “goal-oriented and contextually situated, shaped by legal-political, technical, socio-cultural, and linguistic frameworks” (Gunnarsson, 2009). However, as noted above, the discourse of organizations is becoming less formal and more like everyday personal communication. Generation Z is a driving force in this shift—bringing the vernacular, tone, and expectations from social media and group chats into emails, meetings, and even leadership communications. For managers, this means that traditional top-down or formal communication styles may no longer resonate; instead, authenticity and relatability are increasingly key to effective discourse across hierarchies.

Research shows that Generation Z employees prefer brief, direct, and technology-mediated communication, particularly via instant messaging and social platform-based channels that allow rapid, informal interactions (Stillman & Stillman, 2017, p. 96; Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018). They tend to disengage from communication that feels bureaucratic, hierarchical, or overly formal, responding instead to conversational, transparent, and inclusive language—even in interactions with senior leaders or external stakeholders (Raslie, 2021). A supportive and empathetic communication climate is critical, as young employees value transparency, psychological safety, and continuous feedback (Waworuntu et al., 2022).

Generation Z is also highly sensitive to whether their contributions are acknowledged: when ideas are dismissed or not taken seriously, employees perceive this as disrespect, which can undermine engagement, motivation, and organizational commitment (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018; Mosca & Merkle, 2024). Standardized corporate templates or generic training materials that are seen to lack authenticity or fail to reflect diverse identities may feel alienating, whereas communication that demonstrates empathy and cultural awareness strengthens trust and connection (Men et al., 2024). With E-Mail, Slack, Microsoft Teams, and instant messaging shaping professional discourse, organizations

aiming to attract and retain Gen Z talent must adapt their communication practices, fostering a relational, inclusive, and authentic workplace culture (Waworuntu et al., 2022).

Generation Z and AI-Mediated Communication Tools

AI tools now enable organizations to reduce linguistic barriers by providing translation, summarization, and writing support across diverse teams. Tools such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, and Grammarly Business help create clearer communication for employees who are non-native speakers or new to a workplace's discourse norms, thereby fostering linguistic inclusivity and professional parity (Mortensen, 2025). Yet this same AI-driven standardization can also risk erasing linguistic individuality and flattening cultural heritage, raising concerns about voice and authenticity in AI-mediated workspaces (Crawford, 2021). When every memo or E-Mail is polished by the same algorithm, the nuances of personal and cultural expression may be diminished or lost. For Gen Z, more than earlier cohorts, language—including slang, code-switching, and meme-based expression—functions as a crucial identity cue, making this kind of homogenization feel especially alienating. As a result, leaders and organizations face growing pressure to strike a balance between consistency and personalization in their communication practices.

Digital and AI tools have undoubtedly increased operational efficiency for Gen Z, but they have also introduced new expectations and potential stressors related to these work values. On one hand, Gen Z expects technology (including AI) to facilitate flexibility, quick solutions, and on-demand feedback in line with their values of autonomy and continuous development. A recent study, for example, found that Gen Z students are more interested in adopting generative AI tools in learning environments than their Gen X and Millennial teachers, reflecting a high comfort level with AI that likely extends into workplace expectations (Chan & Lee, 2023). This suggests that young professionals may look to AI for instantaneous answers or creative inspiration and may even feel empowered by having AI “co-pilots” in their work (Wei, 2023; Selvam & Zakaria, 2024). On the other hand, heavy reliance on AI in communication

can conflict with Gen Z's desire for authentic human connection, mentorship, and empathy in the workplace. AI can emulate empathy, but authentic human interaction remains crucial in contexts demanding emotional intelligence and ethical judgment (Crawford, 2021). For instance, while an AI chatbot might provide a Gen Z employee with quick tips or company knowledge, it cannot fully replace the understanding and encouragement that a human mentor offers. Gen Z workers might appreciate AI tools for efficiency yet still crave personalized feedback from a manager who understands their individual context.

At the same time, AI systems are reshaping the very language of work, influencing tone, perceived authority, and interpersonal dynamics. Concepts such as “agentic AI” and the rise of “superworkers” (AI-augmented employees) illustrate shifting power dynamics in how tasks, decisions, and communication unfold (Bersin, 2025). Algorithms now mediate not only data and workflows but also organizational language, hierarchies, and feedback loops. They may prioritize messages, suggest responses, or communicate directly with customers via chatbots—effectively inserting themselves into everyday workplace discourse. Whenever the communicative context permits, Generation Z often resists mechanized or overly scripted norms, advocating instead for authenticity, inclusion, and values-driven communication in digital workplaces (Tirocchi, 2024). Their comfort with technology (Raslie, 2021; Zahra et al., 2025) does not result in a passive acceptance; on the contrary, young employees readily call out communication they perceive as inauthentic—particularly when it originates from an AI system or a standardized corporate template.

Gen Z's fluency with personalization, meaning digital tools that tailor content to individual interests and usage patterns, and adaptive learning, in which systems adjust feedback and difficulty based on user performance, also positions them as early adopters of AI-driven platforms such as Brainly, Grammarly, and CourseHero (FlexOS, 2024). Many routinely use AI chatbots to brainstorm ideas or obtain quick explanations, treating these systems as extensions of their own cognitive processes. Although overreliance on such tools can reduce certain forms of cognitive engagement (Ovalle, 2025; Kasneci et al., 2023), thoughtfully applied AI has the potential to reinforce Gen Z's motivation and creativity (Kavitha & Joshith, 2024). Emerging AI companions like xAI's

Grok—an animated, voice-enabled avatar designed to form an ongoing “working relationship” with the user—offer a glimpse into hybrid spaces where human and machine intelligence converge. In such scenarios, emotional connection, professional discourse, and machine interactivity intersect in new ways (Geekflare, 2025). For example, a Gen Z employee might collaborate with an AI agent on a project, perceiving it simultaneously as a tool and a conversational partner. This blurring of roles challenges traditional assumptions about communication, including who is the sender and who is the receiver.

Ultimately, AI is not only transforming how work is accomplished, but also how individuals construct and express identity through communication. For Generation Z—whose sense of identity is deeply digital, visual, and dialogical (Stillman & Stillman, 2017, p. 91)—maintaining authenticity and empathy within AI-mediated environments will be essential for preserving human voice and values in the virtual workplace. They will expect employers to apply AI in ways that strengthen, rather than replace, human connection. In practical terms, this may involve using AI to handle routine information exchange while reserving feedback, mentoring, and sensitive discussions for human-to-human interaction. It also means ensuring that AI-supported communication—such as emails drafted with an AI assistant—still reflects the personal voice of its sender rather than appearing generic or impersonal.

Managing Communication in the Modern Workplace

As digital tools become deeply embedded in everyday workflows—and AI-generated writing increasingly shapes workplace communication—establishing clear and shared communication norms has become essential. Hybrid and remote work, supported by platforms such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp, have enhanced operational efficiency but also introduce new forms of communicative strain. When multiple platforms are used simultaneously, information easily becomes fragmented or delayed. AI-assisted writing tools further increase the volume of written communication, intensifying

uncertainty about message urgency and contributing to communication overload. Some employees feel compelled to respond immediately to every notification, while others overlook important messages as discussions sprawl across channels.

Clear guidelines that assign specific communicative functions to designated platforms can reduce this complexity and stress (Rogers & Dorison, 2025). For instance, organizations may reserve urgent issues for a specific chat channel with mandatory notifications while assigning longer discussions to forums where AI tools can support drafting, summarizing, or organizing contributions. By formalizing such norms, organizations ensure that AI-enhanced communication remains manageable, equitable, and structured for all employees—including Gen Z.

AI, Organizational Values and Workplace Culture

Individual work values—defined as motivational beliefs related to work and career—shape attitudes toward job satisfaction, career choices, and engagement (Busque-Carrier et al., 2022). Hossli et al. (2024) emphasize that these values represent the priorities individuals hope will be recognized at work, while personal values guide broader decision-making and expectations. Importantly, “work values differ across generations, career stages, and cultures” (Silva & Carvalho, 2021), meaning AI adoption can either reinforce or undermine perceived value alignment.

Organizational values strongly influence communication practices and signal a company’s identity to employees and external stakeholders. Language norms reveal whether a workplace promotes hierarchy and formality or prioritizes openness and collaboration (Koester, 2010). When AI-generated communication reinforces overly formal or standardized styles, it may inadvertently reflect values misaligned with Gen Z’s expectations—for example, conveying rigidity in a workplace that claims to promote empowerment. Based on current insights, AI can be trained to support value alignment by offering inclusive, accessible language or helping teams maintain transparency through consistent updates and documentation.

Work values may shift in response to workplace changes, while personal values tend to be more stable, though still shaped by socialization processes. The degree of alignment between individual and organizational values influences job satisfaction and engagement (Hossli et al., 2024). For Gen Z employees who value innovation and continuous learning, AI-enabled environments offering experimentation and digital creativity enhance congruence. Conversely, risk-averse environments—particularly those relying on rigid AI-generated communication templates—may feel restrictive.

Work Values of Gen Z in AI-Shaped Environments

Gen Z is often praised for creativity and technological proficiency (Chen & Ha, 2023), though some employers express doubts about workplace readiness and view their expectations as unrealistic (Maloni et al., 2019). Giving these mixed perceptions, understanding how digitalization and AI shape their communication patterns, mental health expectations, and work values is crucial for effectively engaging young talent.

Building on this, Gen Z places strong value on work-life balance, mental health, belonging, and purpose—sometimes over traditional advancement (Mould, 2025; Vieira et al., 2024). Social values, including interpersonal relationships and community, are particularly significant (Silva & Carvalho, 2021; Kapuściński et al., 2023). They seek transparent, frequent feedback (Katz et al., 2021)—a need AI can support through rapid responses but cannot fulfill emotionally. However, this heightened emphasis on belonging and growth also intersects with career expectations. At times, their ambitions for rapid career growth conflict with traditional advancement structures, leading to frustration when progress appears slow (Vieira et al., 2024).

In parallel, AI influences organizational values in two ways: it can support autonomy, efficiency, and flexibility, but can also increase pressure through constant availability, digital surveillance, or standardized communication norms. This duality is particularly significant for Gen Z, who may disengage if AI-driven efficiency compromises their sense of agency or creativity, or if accelerated automation reduces opportunities for learning (Vieira et al., 2024).

Similarly, while Gen Z values autonomy (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Katz et al., 2021; Rzemieniak & Wawer, 2021), they also emphasize diversity, transparency, and open dialogue, actively seeking opportunities to contribute to projects aligned with these principles (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). Intrinsic rewards—such as a sense of purpose and meaningful involvement—can be as motivating for Gen Z as traditional extrinsic incentives like bonuses or benefits. However, AI can also undermine their aspirations if its systems obscure decision-making or reinforce hidden hierarchies, contradicting Gen Z's commitment to transparency judgement.

Moreover, Gen Z demonstrates a complex orientation toward teamwork: they value individual expression yet seek support and community. They thrive in tech-integrated workflows that facilitate collaboration, such as co-creating in Google Docs while video-chatting or coordinating work across tools like Google Sheets, Trello, or Canva (Ludviga & Sluka, 2023). However, as collaborative platforms increasingly integrate AI, writing and editing tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, Grammarly) can increase efficiency but also standardize language, reducing variation and potentially suppressing dialects or culturally specific expressions (Amin et al., 2025). Furthermore, a recent study by Kos'myna et al. (2025) revealed significant drop in brain connectivity when performing LLM-assisted writing. Since AI tools increasingly become standard in organizational settings, concerns about linguistic justice and cultural equity grow (Buddemeyer et al., 2021).

Consequently, while AI empowers Gen Z with immediate insights and creative tools, aligning with their technological expectations (Chan & Lee, 2023), yet may undermine their need for authenticity, mentorship, and empathy (Crawford, 2021). Tools that assist with learning, productivity, real-time editing, or idea generation enhance digital strengths but cannot replicate interpersonal nuance. Working across multiple platforms can feel overwhelming, and AI-generated notifications can intensify distraction. Thus, although Gen Z appreciates AI for efficiency, they still rely on human-centered feedback, valuing managers who understand their personal and professional context.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight that organizations must use AI to augment human-centric values rather than replace them. If mental health

and work–life balance matter to Gen Z, AI should automate repetitive tasks rather than reinforce expectations of constant availability. If belonging and purpose are essential, AI should enhance community-building (e.g., intelligent mentorship pairing) instead of functioning mainly as surveillance. Effective use of AI requires workplaces that remain “high-tech yet high-touch”, combining efficiency with empathy and meaning.

AI, Digital Language and Generational Identity

Each generation develops its own linguistic repertoire—through slang, symbols, and expressions—to reinforce peer bonds and assert autonomy. Today, language evolution is heavily driven by digital engagement: social media platforms, messaging apps, and AI-mediated tools accelerate the spread of new words and symbols, often resulting in global youth slang (e.g., “LOL”, emojis, memes). Predictive text, autocomplete, and algorithmic recommendations further amplify this linguistic diffusion. Katz et al. (2021) identify three major transformations shaping contemporary communication: (1) the need to master multiple social codes, (2) the rise of collaborative work modes, and (3) new expectations regarding engagement. Mastering multiple social codes means a Gen Z employee may shift from a formal email to a meme-filled chat, then issue concise commands to a voice assistant—all within minutes.

Gen Z’s linguistic and social identities are strongly intertwined with digital and AI-mediated environments. These environments promote brief, playful, multimodal expression blending visual and textual communication (Prensky, 2009). Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Discord, and YouTube shape conversational rhythms that privilege visual storytelling and interactivity (Prensky, 2009). Chen & Ha (2023) also point out that social media consumption increases peer pressure and the desire for social acceptance among Gen Z. Surveys indicate that most Gen Z integrates slang from these platforms into everyday speech, including workplace interactions (Yang et al., 2024). Informal shorthand enables speed and efficiency (Kencana, 2025). Compared to the general population, Gen Z uses terms like cancel, ghost, and block more frequently, reflecting digital social norms (Katz et al., 2021). Memes serve as

emotional shorthand and cultural commentary (Shifman, 2013), conveying complex sentiments efficiently. Their communication style is friendly, relationship-oriented, and empathy-focused (Visser & Terblanche, 2025). Gen Z frequently engages in “style-flexing”, adjusting tone depending on audience and platform—a skill increasingly influenced by AI-generated phrasing tools (Raslie, 2021). While AI can help Gen Z articulate their ideas and participate more confidently in professional discourse, excessive reliance may erode individuality.

Growing up immersed in smartphones and digital platforms, Gen Z blends verbal, visual, and symbolic modes in ways that diverge from face-to-face communication patterns (Prensky, 2009). This hybridity constructs both meaning and identity (Kencana, 2025). They often avoid confrontational communication, favoring styles grounded in psychological safety (Chuah et al., 2025). AI-generated tone adjustment may reinforce softened language while limiting direct dialogue. Gen Z interacts daily with AI—from chatbots to recommendation algorithms—and is comfortable with semi-conversational machine exchanges (Chan & Lee, 2023). This cultivates expectations that communication, human or AI, should be interactive, fast, and feedback rich. Up to 60% use AI assistants daily (Jarco & Sułkowski, 2023), normalizing “always-on” rhythms. Interacting with voice assistants requiring direct commands (“Alexa, set a reminder for 3 PM”) can encourage more concise or imperative styles (Floridi, 2023). Older generations may perceive this as abrupt, highlighting tensions in politeness norms (Tagg & Seargeant, 2017).

As younger generations reshape workplace discourse, organizations must consider the cultural and ethical implications of linguistic standardization in AI-mediated communication. Efficiency should not come at the expense of the linguistic richness that makes communication meaningful. Leadership plays a pivotal role in establishing structures that foster open communication, whether AI-assisted or not.

Generational Differences in Emoji Use

Emojis act as expressive stand-ins for tone and nonverbal cues in digital communication, yet their meanings shift depending on generation, relationship, and context (Derks et al., 2008). A simple symbol like “😊” can convey warmth, irony, or mild sarcasm, with interpretations varying widely across age groups. In multilingual settings, Gen Z often blends English terms with local idioms and uses emojis as universal meaning-making tools (Kencana, 2025).

Gen Z uses emojis deliberately and with strong audience awareness. Xu et al. (2025) show that most Gen Z use emojis with friends (80%) and classmates (70%), but far fewer do so with older generations (25%), reflecting sensitivity to shifting digital norms. They often employ emojis with layers of irony or playfulness (Abbasi et al., 2025), while Millennials tend to interpret them more literally, and Gen X/Boomers favor straightforward emotional signals. Although emojis can function as a cross-cultural visual language (Xu et al., 2025), generational interpretations vary significantly.

These differences appear clearly in the workplace. Gen Z is more likely than older colleagues to use emojis with managers or customers (Ahmed, 2025), while Gen X and Boomers remain more cautious (YouGov & Atlasian, 2025). The thumbs-up (👍) is widely used by Gen Z as quick acknowledgment (Ahmed, 2025), but some older users interpret it as abrupt. Symbols like 💀 (“I’m dying of laughter” for Gen Z) often confuse older coworkers. Likewise, 🙏 may mean “thanks” to younger users but “prayer” to older colleagues.

Emojis can enhance connection in remote or hybrid teams by adding warmth and immediacy (Liegl & Furtner, 2024; Choi et al., 2023). Yet reliance on emojis, GIFs, and acronyms may create cross-generational misunderstandings or blur professional boundaries (Kencana, 2025; Skovholt et al., 2014). What feels natural to a 23-year-old may appear vague or unprofessional to a 50-year-old expecting clearer confirmation.

For leaders, recognizing these patterns is essential. Some organizations now create internal emoji guidelines or glossaries to ensure shared understanding while preserving employees’ ability to express tone authentically. When used

mindfully, emojis can enhance clarity and connection rather than detract from professional communication.

A Two-Dimensional Lens on AI, Authorial Voice, and Organizational Discourse

To examine how generative AI influences personal expression and workplace discourse, we propose a two-dimensional analytical lens. The first-dimension concerns *identity*—including voice, agency, and authenticity—while the second concerns *communication*, encompassing linguistic norms and discourse patterns. Together, these dimensions highlight how AI mediation can alter both self-presentation and the character of workplace interaction.

Identity: Voice, Agency and Authenticity

In human communication, *voice* reflects the personal style through which identity becomes visible in language. Lehman (2024) frames writing as an act of leadership and identity assertion, where effective communication depends on skillfully projecting one's voice. When AI tools intervene—through autocomplete, tone assistants, or automated drafting—personal voice may become muted or reshaped toward an “algorithmic” neutrality. This raises concerns about authenticity: *does the message still sound like me?*

Homogenization is another risk. If many employees use the same AI writing assistant, distinctive voices can converge into similar patterns. This also touches agency: when AI selects most of the phrasing, the locus of authorship becomes blurred. Although the human presses “send”, their influence over content may be diminished.

Research supports the importance of maintaining a recognizable, audience-attuned voice. Lehman, Cybulska-Gómez de Celis, and Sułkowski (2022) found that communication with a clear personal voice increases persuasiveness and engagement. If AI assistance removes too much individuality, the communication

effectiveness and the sense of human touch can suffer. Employees may also feel reduced ownership over AI-shaped messages, potentially weakening engagement and connection to their work.

At the same time, AI can reinforce identity expression when used as a creative aid, for example by suggesting vocabulary that helps articulate ideas more precisely. In such cases, AI amplifies rather than replaces the individual's voice.

Communication: Linguistic Norms and Discourse Patterns

Generative AI also shapes the *form* and *flow* of workplace language. AI tools typically promote clarity, correctness, and stylistic consistency. Tukachinsky Forster, Kee, and Li (2025) note that these systems tend to standardize language and reduce stylistic variation. While this can elevate baseline quality (e.g. fewer typos, clearer sentences), it may also suppress informal characteristics, slang, or culturally grounded expressions—elements that younger employees might otherwise use to signal identity or rapport.

AI mediation also alters discourse patterns. Chatbots may handle initial customer interactions; automated assistants schedule meetings or triage messages. As a result, segments of workplace exchange shift from human–human to machine–human or machine–machine interaction. This raises questions about the depth and relational quality of communication: AI may streamline transactional exchanges but limit opportunities for more exploratory, relational dialogue.

Power dynamics are also encoded in discourse. When leaders rely on AI to draft announcements, AI becomes a form of ghostwriter for leadership voice. Jarco and Sułkowski's (2023) study on business consulting advice illustrates this boundary clearly: while ChatGPT produced plausible recommendations, it could *not replace* expert human judgment (Jarco & Sułkowski, 2023). Applied to communication, this suggests that AI may supply options, but humans must contextualize, interpret, and assert final judgement to retain agency.

Integrating the Two Dimensions

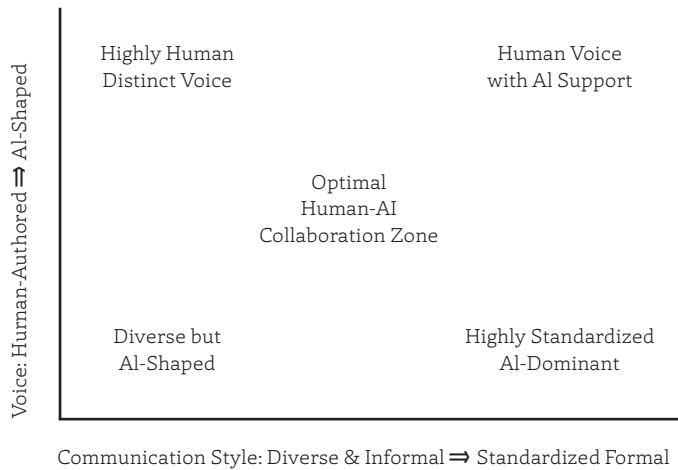
Across identity and communication, AI creates both synergy and tension. It may help individuals articulate ideas or reduce barriers for those who struggle with writing. Yet overreliance risks masking personality, standardizing tone, and diminishing creativity and the authenticity highly valued by Gen Z and others.

A conceptual illustration (Figure 1 below) positions identity on a spectrum from “fully human-authored voice” to “AI-shaped voice”, and communication on a spectrum from “diverse, informal discourse” to “standardized, formal discourse”. The optimal zone is one of *balanced human-AI collaboration*: AI offers scaffolding, efficiency, and clarity, while humans preserve individuality, empathy, and critical thinking.

Practically, organizations can encourage employees to treat AI outputs as drafts rather than final versions, editing and customizing them to reassert voice and agency. This approach aligns with emerging understandings of responsible AI literacy or “AI etiquette”: using tools effectively while safeguarding the human element of communication. By separating *identity expression* and *communication norms* and examining their points of interaction, the model offers mechanisms through which AI may enhance or erode authenticity, agency and discourse quality.

Generative AI therefore influences both *who* is speaking (identity) and *how* they are speaking (communication). Leaders must maintain intentionality in AI-assisted communication. As Lehman (2024) argues, AI-mediated leadership discourse requires a clear personal voice; if AI-generated messages lack this resonance, they risk feeling hollow or impersonal. Maintaining this balance helps ensure that AI enhances communication while preserving the authenticity and human connection that underpin trust in organizational settings.

Figure 1. AI, Identity and Communication Axes



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Concluding Remarks

The evolving landscape of work will be shaped not only by the sophistication of intelligent systems, but also by our ability to integrate them in ways that preserve human judgment, creativity, and empathy at the core of communication. AI is not merely a productivity enhancer, but also a linguistic and cultural creator that is impacting the discourse of modern work. Its integration into professional communication demands critical awareness of how language constructs meaning, power, and belonging in hybrid workplaces. This paper has demonstrated that AI technologies do not simply *mediate* professional discourse—they actively shape its tone, structure, and social dynamics. For Generation Z, communication is no longer confined strictly to separate verbal or written channels; it is multimodal, visual, and often algorithmically co-constructed, blending human creativity with machine intelligence. The findings and discussions presented above indicate that Gen Z's communication preferences—both in face-to-face and written contexts—are marked by informality, immediacy, and the use of visual cues, reflecting a broader shift toward a more relational, participatory model of

workplace communication. However, the same digital tools that enable global connectivity and rapid collaboration can also weaken interpersonal sensitivity and contextual depth if not managed thoughtfully.

Future leadership and communication strategies must therefore balance technological fluency with relational competence, ensuring that efficiency does not come at the expense of empathy. As organizational discourse becomes increasingly standardized by digital systems, maintaining diversity of expression and cultural specificity becomes essential for inclusion and innovation. AI can assist with communication, but it remains a tool that should serve human-centered goals: fostering understanding, sharing knowledge, and building relationships.

For organizations, these insights highlight the importance of cultivating AI-communication literacy by equipping employees—particularly younger cohorts like Gen Z—with the skills to use digital tools responsibly, critically, and empathetically. Training programs should not only cover how to operate AI tools, but also raise awareness of how tone, clarity, and cultural context shape meaning in hybrid communication. For example, employees might be trained to review and edit AI-generated content to better fit the intended audience and to ensure the content aligns with the company's values and the individual's voice. Leaders must also establish ethical and inclusive language policies that safeguard authenticity and linguistic diversity amid increasing automation. Rather than enforcing one “correct” way to communicate, progressive organizations might celebrate a range of expression styles (formal and informal) and encourage employees to bring their “whole self”—responsibly—into communication, with AI as an aid not a filter.

By aligning communication strategies with the values and expectations of Generation Z, organizations can strengthen engagement, trust, and cohesion with their young talent. This might involve rethinking top-down communication in favor of more dialogue and feedback loops, adopting collaborative platforms where Gen Z feels at home, and validating the new forms of language that Gen Z uses (like emojis and gifs) as legitimate workplace expression, within appropriate limits. It also involves conscious efforts by older generations to bridge the communication gap—for instance, learning the basics of new

digital slang or being open to informal check-ins on chat—to create a two-way adaptation.

For scholars and practitioners alike, this is an exciting juncture that calls for ongoing inquiry into how language, technology, and generational identity interact to shape the future of human communication. The conceptual model introduced regarding AI, identity, and communication is one attempt to map this evolving terrain. Additional research could empirically test the effects of AI-mediated communication on outcomes like team cohesion, identity affirmation, and knowledge retention among different age groups. Future studies would also benefit from close discourse analysis of AI-generated communication artifacts—such as onboarding scripts, performance feedback messages, or chatbot interactions—to better understand how language shapes workplace identity, authority, and inclusion when a non-human agent is involved. As generative AI becomes more integrated into daily workflows, each organization will become, in a sense, a micro-laboratory for observing how our species negotiates meaning and connection with the help (or hindrance) of intelligent machines. The challenge and opportunity ahead lie in ensuring that as we embrace the efficiencies of AI, we also reaffirm the human values and cultural nuances that make communication not just effective, but genuinely meaningful.

Disclosure

ChatGPT was used solely for language refinement and formatting. All scientific content, analysis, and conclusions are authors' own.

References

Abbasi, M., Jamshed, N., & Bilal, R. (2025). Discourse analysis of emoji use in digital communication by the millennials & Gen Z: A comparative endeavor. *The Journal of Cultural Perspectives*, 4(1), 80–108.

Ahmed, A. (2025, April 26). Gen Z is twice as likely to send emojis to senior managers, shaping new office communication norms. *Digital Information World*. Retrieved from <https://www.digitalinformationworld.com/2025/04/gen-z-is-twice-as-likely-to-send-emojis.html>. Accessed 21 July 2025.

Amin, M., Rasheed, H., Ali, S., & Ara, A. (2025). Artificial intelligence and the standardization of global English: A sociolinguistic inquiry. *Qualitative Research Journal for Social Studies*, 2(3), 365–375.

Becher, K. L. (2022). We want connection and we do not mean Wi-Fi: Examining the impacts of Covid-19 on Gen Z's work and employment outcomes. *Management Research Review*, 45(5), 684–699.

Bejtkovsky, J. (2016). The employees of Baby Boomers' Generation, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z in selected Czech corporations as conceivers of development and competitiveness in their corporation. *Journal of Competitiveness*, 8(4), 105–123.

Benítez-Márquez, M. D., Sánchez-Teba, E. M., Bermúdez-González, G., & Núñez-Rydmán, E. S. (2022). Generation Z within the workforce and in the workplace: A bibliometric analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 736820.

Bencsik, A., Horváth-Csikós, G., & Juhász, T. (2016). Y and Z generations at workplaces. *Journal of Competitiveness*, 8(3), 90–106.

Bersin, J. (2025). The rise of the superworker: Transforming work with agentic AI. The Josh Bersin Company. Retrieved from <https://joshbersin.com/2025/01/the-rise-of-the-superworker-delivering-on-the-promise-of-ai/>. Accessed 3 December 3 2025.

Bianchini, F. (2025). Generative Artificial Intelligence: A concept in progress. *Philosophy & Technology*, 38(2), 46.

Buddemeyer, A., Walker, E., & Alikhani, M. (2021). Words of wisdom: Representational harms in learning from AI communication, *arXiv preprint arXiv:2111.08581*.

Busque-Carrier, M., Ratelle, C. F., & Le Corff, Y. (2022). Work values and job satisfaction: The mediating role of basic psychological needs at work. *Journal of Career Development*, 49(6), 1386–1401.

Chan, C. K. Y., & Lee, K. K. (2023). The AI generation gap: Are Gen Z students more interested in adopting generative AI such as ChatGPT in teaching and learning than their Gen X and Millennial generation teachers? *Smart learning environments*, 10(1), 60.

Chen, P., & Ha, L. (2023). Gen Z's social media use and global communication. *Online Media and Global Communication*, 2(3), 301–303.

Chillakuri, B., & Mahanandia, R. (2018). Generation Z entering the workforce: the need for sustainable strategies in maximizing their talent. *Human Resource Management International Digest*, 26(4), 34–38.

Choi, J., Shim, S.-H., & Kim, S. (2023). The power of emojis: The impact of a leader's use of positive emojis on members' creativity. *PLOS ONE*, 18(7), e0285368.

Chuah, K.-M., Mohamad Deli, R., & Ch'ng, L.-C. (2025). Gen Z and group work: How communication styles affect free-riding behaviours. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 41(1), 423–437.

Cooren, F., Vaara, E., Langley, A., & Tsoukas, H. (Eds.) (2014). *Language and communication at work: Discourse, narrativity, and organizing* (Vol. 4). OUP Oxford.

Crawford, K. (2021). *Atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence*. Yale University Press.

Dahlke, J. (2024). AI go by many names: towards a sociotechnical definition of artificial intelligence. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2410.13452*.

Derks, D., Bos, A. E. R., & von Grumbkow, J. (2008). Emoticons and online message interpretation. *Social Science Computer Review*, 26(3), 379–388.

Feuerriegel, S., Hartmann, J., Janiesch, C., & Zschech, P. (2024). Generative AI. *Business & Information Systems Engineering*, 66(1), 111–126.

FlexOS (2024, January 29). *Generative AI Top 150: The world's most used AI tools (Feb 2024)*. Retrieved from <https://www.flexos.work/learn/generative-ai-top-150>. Accessed 12 June 2025.

FlexOS (2025, February). *AI for Work Top 100*. Retrieved from <https://www.flexos.work/ai-top-100>. Accessed 16 July 2025.

Floridi, L. (2023). *The ethics of Artificial Intelligence: Principles, challenges, and opportunities*. Oxford University Press.

Gabrielova, K., & Buchko, A. A. (2021). Here comes Generation Z: Millennials as managers. *Business Horizons*, 64(4), 489–499.

García-Peñalvo, F. J., & Vázquez-Ingelmo, A. (2023). What do we mean by GenAI? A systematic mapping of the evolution, trends, and techniques involved in generative AI. *International Journal of Interactive Multimedia and Artificial Intelligence*, 8(4), 7–16.

Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. Routledge.

Geekflare (2025, July 14). Grok's new AI companions are live: What you should know. Retrieved from <https://geekflare.com/news/grok-new-ai-companions-are-live-what-you-should-know/>. Accessed 27 July 2025.

Gunnarsson, B. L. (2009). *Professional discourse* (Vol. 10). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Hammad, H. S. (2025). Teaching the digital natives: Examining the learning needs and preferences of Gen Z learners in higher education. *Transcultural Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 214–242.

Harari, Y. N. (2024). *Nexus: A brief history of information networks from the Stone Age to AI*. Random House.

Hossli, N., Natter, M., & Algesheimer, R. (2024). On the importance of congruence between personal and work values—How value incongruence affects job satisfaction: A multiple mediation model. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 14(3), 2905.

Jarrahi, M. H. (2018). Artificial intelligence and the future of work: Human–AI symbiosis in organizational decision making. *Business Horizons*, 61(4), 577–586.

Jarco, D., & Sułkowski, Ł. (2023). Is ChatGPT better at business consulting than an experienced human analyst? An experimental comparison of solutions to a strategic business problem. *Forum Scientiae Oeconomia*, 11(2), 87–109.

Kapuściński, G., Zhang, N., & Wang, R. (2023). What makes hospitality employers attractive to Gen Z? A means–end chain perspective. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 29(4), 602–616.

Kasneci, E., Seßler, K., Küchemann, S., Bannert, M., Dementieva, D., Fischer, F., ... & Kasneci, G. (2023). ChatGPT for good? On opportunities and challenges

of large language models for education. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 103, 102274.

Katz, R., Ogilvie, S., Shaw, J., & Woodhead, L. (2021). Gen Z, explained: The art of living in a digital age. In *Gen Z, explained*. University of Chicago Press.

Kavitha, K., & Joshith, V. P. (2024). Factors shaping the adoption of AI tools among Gen Z: An extended UTAUT2 model investigation. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 44(1–2), 12–32.

Kencana, N. (2025). Semantics in digital communication: An analysis of text message usage in class groups by Generation Z in higher education. *La Ogi: English Language Journal*, 11(1), 50–61.

Keyton, J., Beck, S. J., Poole, M. S., & Gouran, D. S. (2021). Group communication: A continued evolution. In S. J. Beck, J. Keyton, & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *The Emerald Handbook of Group and Team Communication Research* (pp. 7–24). Emerald.

Koester, A. (2010). Workplace discourse. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Kos'myna, N. (2025). *Your brain on ChatGPT*. MIT Media Lab. Retrieved from <https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/your-brain-on-chatgpt/>. Accessed 24 June 2025.

Lehman, I. M., Cybulska-Gómez de Celis, K., & Sułkowski, Ł. (2022). Writing to make a difference: Discursive analysis of writer identity in research articles on management. *Ibérica*, 44, 155–178.

Lehman, I. M. (2024). *Voice and identity in AI-mediated leadership discourse* (Manuscript or book, forthcoming).

Liegl, S., & Furtner, M. (2024). Emotional leader communication in the digital age: An experimental investigation on the role of emoji. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 154, 108148.

Lifintsev, D., & Wellbrock, W. (2019). Cross-cultural communication in the digital age. *Estudos em Comunicação*, 1(28), 129–142.

Ludviga, I., & Sluka, I. (2023). Work values and motivating factors of Generation Z—an analysis of empirical research in Poland, Portugal, and Latvia. In *Managing Generation Z* (pp. 31–59). Routledge.

Maloni, M., Hiatt, M. S., & Campbell, S. (2019). Understanding the work values of Gen Z business students. *International Journal of Management Education*, 17(3), 100320.

McKinsey & Company. (2023). *The state of AI in 2023: Generative AI's breakout year*. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai-in-2023-generative-ais-breakout-year>. Accessed 15 January 2025.

Men, L. R., Thelen, P. D., & Qin, Y. S. (2024). The impact of diversity communication on employee organizational identification and employee voice behaviours: A moderated mediation model. *Public Relations Review*, 2024, 50(4), 102492.

Mortensen, M. (2025). AI in the workplace: Trade-offs and benefits. *Harvard Business Review*, 103(4), 77–85.

Mosca, J. B., & Merkle, R. C. (2024). Strategic Onboarding: Tailoring Gen Z Transition for Workplace Success. *Journal of Business Diversity*, 24(1).

Mould, O. (2025, January 8). Why are Gen Z shunning ‘hustle culture’ in favour of long-term jobs? Here are three good reasons. *The Guardian*. Retrieved

from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/08/gen-z-hustle-culture-jobs-workers-stability>. Accessed 3 July 2025..

Ovalle, D. (2025, June 29). Is AI rewiring our minds? Scientists probe cognitive cost of chatbots. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2025/06/29/chatgpt-ai-brain-impact/>. Accessed 13 July 2025.

Parsakia, K., Rostami, M., Darbani, S. A., Saadati, N., & Navabinejad, S. (2023). Explanation of the concept of generation disjunction in studying generation z. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies (JAYPS)*, 4(2), 136–142.

Prensky, M. (2009). H. Sapiens Digital: From Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom. *Innovate: Journal of Online Education*, 5(3).

PwC study (2020). So tickt die Generation Z. Retrieved from <https://www.pwc.de/de/handel-und-konsumguter/so-tickt-die-generation-z.html>. Accessed 20 March 2024.

Raslie, H. (2021). Gen Y and Gen Z communication style. *Studies of Applied Economics*, 39(1).

Rogers, T., & Dorison, C. (2025, August 6). It's time to streamline how we communicate at work. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2025/08/its-time-to-streamline-how-we-communicate-at-work>. Accessed 31 October 2025.

Ronge, R., Maier, M., & Rathgeber, B. (2025). Towards a definition of generative artificial intelligence. *Philosophy & Technology*, 38(31), 1–25.

Rzemieniał, M., & Wawer, M. (2021). Employer branding in the context of the company's sustainable development strategy from the perspective of gender diversity of Generation Z. *Sustainability*, 13(2), 828.

Shavit, Y., Agarwal, S., Brundage, M., Adler, S., O'Keefe, C., Campbell, R., ... & Robinson, D. G. (2023). Practices for governing agentic AI systems. *Research Paper, OpenAI*.

Sharma, I., & Tiwari, V. (2023). Modeling the impact of technostress and burnout on employees' work-life balance and turnover intention: A job demands-resources theory perspective. *Global Business and Organizational Excellence*, 43(1), 121–134.

Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in digital culture*. MIT Press.

Selvam, V. T., & Zakaria, N. Y. K. (2024). A systematic literature review of the impact of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in English language teaching and learning. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 13(3), 3464–3480.

Silva, J., & Carvalho, A. (2021). The work values of Portuguese Generation Z in the higher education-to-work transition phase. *Social Sciences*, 10(8), 297.

Skovholt, K., Grønning, A., & Kankaanranta, A. (2014). The communicative functions of emoticons in workplace e-mails. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(4), 780–797.

Stillman, D., & Stillman, J. (2017). *Gen Z @ Work: How the Next Generation Is Transforming the Workplace*. HarperCollins.

Tagg, C., & Seargeant, P., & Brown, A. A. (2017). *Taking offence on social media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tirocchi, S. (2024). Generation Z, values, and media: from influencers to BeReal, between visibility and authenticity. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8, 1304093.

Tukachinsky Forster, R., Kee, K. & Li, G. (2025). From digital divide to equity – enhancing diffusion: Generative AI and writing quality. *AI & Society*, 1–8.

Turner, A. (2015). Generation Z: Technology and social interest. *The Journal of Individual Psychology*, 71(2), 103–113.

Twenge, J. M. (2023). *Generations: the real differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and what they mean for America's future.* Simon and Schuster.

Vieira, J., Gomes da Costa, C., & Santos, V. (2024). Talent management and Generation Z: A systematic literature review through the lens of employer branding. *Administrative Sciences*, 14(3), 49.

Visser, C., & Terblanche, N. (2025). The soft-skills characteristics of Generation Z employees: A scoping review and research agenda. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management*, 23, 1–23.

Wang, P. (2019). On defining artificial intelligence. *Journal of Artificial General Intelligence*, 10(2), 1–37.

Wei, L. (2023). Artificial intelligence in language instruction: Impact on English learning achievement, L2 motivation, and self-regulated learning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1261955.

Waworuntu, E. C., Kainde, S. J. R., & Mandagi, D. W. (2022). WorkLife Balance, Job Satisfaction and Performance Among Millennial and Gen Z Employees: A Systematic Review. *Society*, 10(2), 384–398.

Xu, H., Guo, M., & Wei, T. (2025). A study of young people aged 15–25 use different emojis depending on the recipient. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, 90(1).

Yang, W., Abd Rahim, N., Hoong, B. L., & Hassim, N. (2024). Sang culture: Social Comparisons of Generation Z Youths in China on Social Media. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 40(1), 248–266.

YouGov & Atlassian (2025, May 27). Are you fluent in Gen Z’s “digital body language?” Atlassian Workplace Insights. Retrieved from <https://www.atlassian.com/blog/communication/digital-body-language>. Accessed 2 December 2025.

Zahra, Y., Handoyo, S., & Fajrianthi, F. (2025). A comprehensive overview of Generation Z in the workplace: Insights from a scoping review. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 51, 2263.

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0015

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Mike Szymanski

Gies College of Business, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, United States

mikeszym@illinois.edu

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2215-6909

Evodio Kaltenecker

D'Amore-McKim School of Business, Northeastern University, United States

e.kaltenecker@northeastern.edu

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6431-5007

Why Language Matters
in Management: Regional
Contributions to a Global
Conversation

Article history:**Received** 10 September 2025**Revised** 16 November 2025**Accepted** 27 November 2025**Available online** 16 December 2025

Abstract: This research note examines how Latin American scholarship contributes to the understanding of language in management. We reviewed top local management journals across Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries, identifying 18 articles published in the past two decades that explicitly address the role of language in management practice and management academia. We aimed to bring forward voices and perspectives often underrepresented in the global management literature. The analysis reveals points of convergence with dominant international discourses as well as distinctive insights shaped by regional cultural, institutional, and linguistic contexts. By highlighting these contributions, we position Latin American scholarship as an essential participant in the global conversation on why language matters in management.

Keywords: Latin America, language, literature analysis, knowledge creation

Introduction

The concept of *culture*—and with it, *cultural difference*—has long been accepted in the management literature. Some of the most influential studies of cultural difference, such as Hofstede and the GLOBE project, originated in business research before spreading into other academic circles. For decades, cultural differences have been credited (or blamed) for a wide range of managerial and organizational outcomes, from market entry mode choice (Kogut & Singh, 1988) to the likelihood of adopting global digital strategies (Meyer et al., 2023). Yet underlying this work was a hidden assumption: that global business speaks one language, with English as the unproblematic lingua franca. More than that,

there appeared to be “one English”, as if all participants in corporate life could be treated as linguistically equivalent once they adopted the language, leaving cultural difference as the only recognized axis of variation.

It was only about 25 years ago that international business scholars began to interrogate this assumption systematically. Early work by Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999) brought the issue of language to a broader IB audience. Their in-depth case study of the Finnish multinational Kone showed how language imposes its own structures on communication flows and networks: staff with limited language skills relied heavily on mediators, while those with superior language competence could access broader relational networks. This shift also helped bridge a longstanding gap in cross-cultural management research, which had traditionally treated culture as a fixed set of values while leaving language largely unexamined. As Brannen and Salk (2000) argue, language is one of the primary media through which culture is enacted and negotiated; paying attention to language, therefore, reveals culture as a dynamic, interactional process rather than a static category. A language-sensitive perspective thus complements—and in some cases corrects—the limitations of the earlier culture frameworks. A turning point came around 2014, when Tietze, Piekkari, and Brannen (2014) urged the IB community to take the multifaceted role of language more seriously, catalyzing a wave of subsequent studies.

Given the inherently multilingual settings of multinational corporations, this attention was perhaps inevitable. As Neeley and Kaplan (2014: 70) observe, language permeates “every aspect of organizational life”. Yet for a long time, the debate remained confined mainly to international business research. More recently, organizational and management scholars have started to recognize that language similarly permeates domestic organizations, even those operating in ostensibly monolingual contexts. Kalra and Szymanski (2023) show how regional dialects and accents can create fault lines within national teams. Hideg, Shen, and Hancock (2022) demonstrate that non-native accents in linguistically homogeneous settings shape both interpersonal evaluations (e.g., hiring decisions) and intrapersonal experiences (e.g., sense of belonging). Schmaus and Kristen (2022) document how non-native accents significantly reduce interview chances in the German labor market. Moreover, even perfect command of a language

does not guarantee equal standing, as native speakers retain privileged status (Szymanski & Brighi, 2025). Collectively, these studies affirm that language is not merely an IB issue but a pervasive organizational phenomenon.

It is no coincidence that European scholars spearheaded early work in this area—unsurprising given the linguistic diversity of Northern Europe (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), Germany (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017), and France (Vigier & Bryant, 2023, 2025). This Eurocentric concentration, however, has limited our understanding of language effects. Scholars have repeatedly called for more research on language diversity in emerging economies (Tenzer et al., 2017) and other megalanguages outside the English sphere of influence. (Ramboarisata & Berrier-Lucas, 2025). Some valuable work has emerged on Asian organizations (Kalra & Szymanski, 2023; Peltokorpi, 2022), but such studies remain relatively scarce. As a result, international journals—already dominated by Western scholars—continue to publish disproportionately on Western organizational contexts (Tietze & Dick, 2013). Voices from other regions risk being muted or overlooked altogether.

This research note seeks to recover some of those missing voices. Specifically, we examine how Latin American scholarship contributes to the understanding of language in management. Recognizing that English-language journals dominate the global conversation, we conducted a literature search of leading academic journals published in Spanish and Portuguese, focusing on the Latin American region. We identified 18 articles published over the past two decades that explicitly address language in management practice and management academia. Our analysis highlights both points of convergence with dominant international discourses and distinctive insights shaped by regional cultural, institutional, and linguistic contexts. By doing so, we aim to position Latin American scholarship as an essential participant in the global conversation on why language matters in management.

Literature analysis

We systematically reviewed leading management journals in Latin America—20 titles published in Spanish and Portuguese, ranging from

well-established outlets (e.g., *Revista de Administração de Empresas* [RAE], founded 1961; *Cadernos EBAPE.BR*, 2003) to newer publications—assessing both their visibility and content (see Table 1). To identify these journals, we first contacted colleagues and senior academics across Latin American countries and asked them to share the most highly regarded local management journals used in national accreditation systems, promotion procedures, and doctoral training. We then cross-referenced this list with the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) database for the Business, Management, and Accounting category, filtered by the Latin American region, to ensure that all journals had recognized visibility. Journals clearly outside the management domain (e.g., agriculture or public policy-focused outlets) were excluded. This process resulted in the final list of 20 journals.

Many of these journals are regionally influential but occupy mid-tier positions in international rankings. *Cuadernos de Gestión* consistently falls in the Q2–Q3 range on the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR = 0.419 in 2024; h-index = 17). RAE similarly ranks in Q3 (SJR = 0.265; h-index = 24) with a modest two-year impact factor (≈ 0.6). Other journals showed similar patterns, indicating respectable regional presence but limited global footprint. We acknowledge that additional journals may exist outside these rankings or our professional networks.

Table 1. Overview of Selected Latin American Management Journals (2005–2025)

Journal	Language	Year Founded	Country	Publisher	Articles 2015–2025	Language-related Articles
Cuadernos de Gestión / Management Letters	Spanish	1985	Spain	Universidad del Pais Vasco	170	2
Spanish Journal of Marketing – ESIC	Spanish	1996	Spain	Emerald Publishing	180	2
Contaduría y Administración	Spanish	1956	Mexico	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México	300 (e)	1
INNOVAR	Spanish	1991	Colombia			
RECAL – Revista de Estudios en Contaduría, Administración e Informática	Spanish	2012	Mexico	Universidad Autonoma del Estado de Mexico	116	0
REVESCO – Revista de Estudios Cooperativos	Spanish	2011	Spain	Universidad Complutense Madrid	279	0
Brazilian Business Review	Portuguese	2004	Brazil	Fundação Instituto Capixaba de Pesquisas em Contabilidade, Economia e Finanças (FUCAPE)	115 (e)	0
Revista Brasileira de Gestão de Negócios	Portuguese	2004	Brazil	Fundação Escola de Comércio Álvares Penteado (FECAP)	385	0
Revista de Administração de Empresas (RAE)	Portuguese	1961	Brazil	Fundacao Getulio Vargas (FGV)	715	2

Journal	Language	Year Founded	Country	Publisher	Articles 2015-2025	Language-related Articles
Revista de Administração Contemporânea (RAC)	Portuguese	1997	Brazil	Associacao Nacional de Pos-Graduacao e Pesquisa em Administracao (ANPAD)	645	0
Gestão e Secretariado	Portuguese	2010	Brazil	SINSESP – Sindicato das Secretárias e Secretários do Estado de São Paulo	2,748	1
Cadernos EBAPE.BR	Portuguese	2003	Brazil	FGV EBAPE	530 (e)	3
Revista de Gestão (REGE)	Portuguese	2010	Brazil	Emerald on behalf of the University of Sao Paulo (USP)	500 (e)	0
Revista Organizações & Sociedade	Portuguese	1993	Brazil	School of Management, at the Federal University of Bahia	188	3

Source: Authors' own compilation based on journal websites, Scimago Journal Rank (SJR), and national accreditation lists.

Our objective was to identify how Latin American management scholarship has engaged with language over the past two decades. To do so, we systematically screened leading journals in the region using Web of Science, Clarivate, and direct searches on journal websites. Both authors independently examined all article titles and abstracts using Spanish and Portuguese terms related to language (e.g., idioma, língua, linguagem, diversidade linguística, proficiência, acento, dialeto). One author initially identified 15 potentially relevant articles and the other 12. After cross-checking and removing duplicates, we arrived at a consolidated list of 18. These 18 articles were drawn from a combined pool of more than 4,000 articles published across the 20 journals between 2005–2025 (see Table 2). We then read all 18 articles in full and synthesized recurring themes and points of divergence through comparative reading rather than formal coding, consistent with the aims of a research note. In itself, this rather low yield of articles reveals an important gap in the literature: although language is increasingly recognized as central to organizational and academic practices globally, it remains comparatively neglected within Latin American management scholarship.

Table 2. Summary of the 18 Latin American Studies on Language in Management (2005–2025)

Reference	Name of the Journal	Area of Influence	Language	Type of the Article	Sample Size	Findings of the Article
1. Faustino & Proença, 2015	The European Journal of Management Studies	Portuguese-speaking world (Portugal focus)	English	Empirical	37 countries, 167 observations, panel data 2000-2005	Immigrant stock positively influences intra-industry trade indexes. Shared language between immigrants and the host country amplifies these effects.
2. Chanlat, 2014	Revista de Administração de Empresas	Portuguese-speaking world	Portuguese	Essay/ Conceptual	N/A	Calls for maintaining linguistic diversity in management research rather than defaulting exclusively to English. Critiques hegemonic practices of English-language dominance in academic publishing.
3. Oliveira & Bulgacov, 2013	Revista de Administração Contemporânea	Brazil only	Portuguese	Essay/ Conceptual	N/A	Applies Wittgenstein's concept of language games to organizational studies and strategy research. Suggests that language games provide a useful lens to analyze strategizing processes and organizational practices. Highlights how linguistic pragmatics can deepen understanding of management and strategy dynamics.

4. Toledo Sarracino, 2023	Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental	Brazil only	English	Empirical	100 students	English proficiency is a key factor in the success of student exchange programs. Students acquire English through multiple channels; TV/radio (35%), living in the US (25%), and private schools (25%). Studying subjects in English improves post-exchange academic performance; policy recommendations emphasize stronger institutional language support.
5. Carrió Pastor & Calderón, 2010	Revista de Lenguas para Fines Específicos	Spain only	English	Empirical	34 students	Spanish students' business letters diverge from English norms due to first-language influence, including paragraph structure and communicative goals. Limited use of text connectors (2.8%), leading to weaker cohesion. Inclusion of personal information not appropriate in English-speaking business contexts.
6. Foguesatto et al., 2023	SSRN Working Paper	Brazil	English (with Portuguese abstract)	Empirical	1,018 bilingual articles from 4 Brazilian Journals (RAE: 64, BBR: 472, RAC: 48, RBGN: 434)	Portuguese-language articles received significantly more citations than English versions Possible reasons: (a) lower English proficiency in Brazil, (b) journals not tied to major international publishers, (c) focus on Brazilian-specific topics with limited global relevance.

7. Ferreira et al., 2022	Accounting Education	Brazil	English	Empirical	2,594 English-language papers by 489 professors from 36 graduate accounting programs (2000-2020)	English-language publications by Brazilian accounting researchers grew steadily, with 62.8% appearing between 2015 and 2020. Only 18.4% were published in strictly accounting journals, and just 67% appeared in JCR-indexed outlets. The majority (73%) were published in journals without impact factors, reflecting difficulties in accessing high-quality international platforms.
8. Chanlat, 2021	Revista de Administração de Empresas	Brazil/French-speaking world	English (trilingual with French and Portuguese abstracts)	Essay	N/A	French intellectual traditions strongly shaped Brazilian administrative sciences through three streams: 1) Organization science (institutional analysis, sociology of organizations), 2) Work sciences (psychodynamics of work, ergonomics), 3) Heterodox economics (regulation theory, economics of convention). This influence is rooted in historical ties and in Brazilian scholars' search for alternatives to Anglo-Saxon academic dominance.

9. Abduljawad, 2023	Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental	Brazil only	English	Empirical	Hybrid: Qualitative and Quantitative (72 Learners)	English proficiency shows a moderate positive correlation with memory, cognitive, and metacognitive learning strategies. Strong correlations also exist among clusters of learning strategies themselves.
10. Alcadipani, 2017	Revista de Administração de Empresas	Portuguese-speaking world	Portuguese	Essay/ Conceptual	N/A	There is a steady increase in Brazilian academic journals publishing primarily in English. Many journals now require at least one version of submitted articles to be in English.
11. Chanlat, 2015	Revista de Administração de Empresas	Portuguese-speaking world	Portuguese	Essay/ Conceptual	N/A	Organizational studies remain dominated by Anglo-American norms. French-speaking academia shows resistance to this dominance. Advocates for developing a “Latin field” that values linguistic and intellectual diversity while addressing current social challenges.
12. Gantman et al., 2015	Revista de Administração de Empresas	International (focus on Latin America & non-Anglo-Saxon regions)	English	Essay	N/A	Anglo-Saxon dominance in management and organizational knowledge constitutes a form of epistemic colonialism. This dominance marginalizes and excludes perspectives from peripheral countries. Calls for greater plurality in the discipline through development of indigenous knowledge.

13. Alves & Pozzebon, 2013	Revista de Administração de Empresas	International (emphasis on Latin America & Brazil)	English	Essay	N/A	Identifies three strategies to resist English linguistic dominance: Scandalization—exposing and protesting the normalization of English. Scrutinization—analyzing how linguistic power is negotiated. Invention—encouraging multilingual practices, retaining original terms, and supporting multi-language journals.
14. Rosa & Alves, 2011	Revista de Administração de Empresas	Brazil and Portuguese-speaking world, with focus on Global South academic production	Portuguese (with abstracts in English and Spanish)	Conceptual Essay/Theoretical	N/A	English hegemony in management knowledge reproduces colonial logics, creating an asymmetric flow of information from North to South. Publication and circulation criteria controlled by the Global North marginalize non-English knowledge, placing Southern researchers in a subaltern position. Brazil's Qualis evaluation system reinforces this hierarchy by prioritizing English-language publications. Counter-hegemonic resistance lies in valuing Global South knowledge and revising evaluation parameters.
15. Fonseca, 2011	Cadernos EBAPE.BR (FGV EBAPE)	Brazil only	Portuguese/English	Empirical (qualitative descriptive field study based on semi-structured interviews)	No information	Cross-cultural interactions reveal both challenges and synergies. Brazilian workers benefit from cultural diversity through stronger relational approaches with customers. American supervisors tend to treat Brazilian employees more equally, generating positive motivational effects.

16. Valverde & Oliveira, 2023	Cadernos EBAPE.BR (FGV EBAPE)	Brazil only	Portuguese/ English/ Spanish	Empirical (qualitative descriptive field study based on semi-structured interviews)	16 consultants	Consultants use <i>translation into practice</i> —adapting concepts to organizational realities—to gain legitimacy across sectors and firm sizes. Rhetorical skill, combined with theoretical and practical knowledge, underpins this translation process. Consultants rely on specialized vocabularies and language games, showing the strategic role of language in their professionalization.
17. De Stefani & Azevedo, 2014	Revista de Ciências da Administração	Brazil	Portuguese	conceptual analysis	N/A	Drucker frames administrator language as a tool to align communication with company goals and secure employee compliance. Administrative practice is predominantly <i>perlocutionary</i> —rooted in command, economic rationality, impersonality, and hierarchical power. The administrator acts as a discourse agent, exercising authority through speech grounded in specific arguments.
18.Tavares, 2005	Cadernos EBAPE.BR (FGV EBAPE)	Brazil only	Portuguese/ English/ Spanish	Essay	N/A	N/A

Source: Authors' own compilation based on full-text review of all identified articles.

Still, the studies we did find are far from marginal. They include sharp critiques of epistemic colonialism and linguistic domination, alongside empirical work on publishing practices and the dilemmas faced by Latin American scholars (e.g., the paradox of “publish in English or perish locally”). Taken together, these contributions show that the conversation about language in management is happening in the region, but in a scattered and often critical way. What seems to be missing is volume and continuity.

Findings

Our review of leading Latin American journals in Spanish and Portuguese reveals a distinct and often critical perspective on the role of language in management, particularly when compared with what is typically described as “global literature”. Importantly, these journals frequently define “global” as academic production dominated by the Anglo-Saxon world, especially the United States and the United Kingdom (Chanlat, 2015; Foguesatto et al., 2023). This difference in vantage point shapes both the areas of convergence with mainstream discourses and the points where Latin American scholarship diverges in profound ways.

Shared Themes

Despite their critical stance, Latin American sources also share important common ground with dominant global discourses. First, both perspectives recognize the central role of English as a lingua franca in academia and business (Rosa & Alves, 2011; Foguesatto et al., 2023). Where Anglo-Saxon literature tends to treat this as a pragmatic given, Latin American contributions interrogate its implications. Second, both bodies of work acknowledge the impact of globalization on business, particularly through FDI, mergers and acquisitions, and expansion into emerging markets (Novais & do Nascimento, 2016). Third, culture is widely understood as a key moderator of human behavior and managerial outcomes, shaping practices from sustainable consumption to

entry mode choices (Novais & do Nascimento, 2016). Fourth, there is a shared emphasis on research quality and impact; however, Latin American sources question how “quality” is measured, exposing the power relations embedded in journal rankings and impact factors (Alves & Pozzebon, 2013; Cooke & Faria, 2013). Finally, both literatures employ qualitative methods, yet Latin American scholarship tends to do so within a stronger critical and interpretive tradition (Novais & do Nascimento, 2016).

Divergent Voices

The most significant distinctions emerge from Latin American journals’ explicitly post-colonial and de-colonial perspectives on Anglo-Saxon dominance in management knowledge. Unlike mainstream work, which rarely questions its own epistemic foundations, Latin American authors foreground critiques of “epistemic colonialism” and “linguistic imperialism” (Chanlat, 2015, 2021). They argue that Anglo-Saxon concepts and models achieve global dominance not because of their neutrality, but because they are institutionally privileged, marginalizing other perspectives and producing what Chanlat (2021) calls “mental colonization” and a “closure of meaning”.

This critique also extends to the very definitions of “international” and “global”. Whereas mainstream literature often uses these terms as shorthand for broad applicability, Latin American sources show how “international” frequently means “Anglo-Saxon-dominated” (Gantman, Yousfi & Alcadipani, 2015). In contrast, they advocate for a pluriversal approach in which multiple epistemologies and linguistic realities can coexist (Ferreira et al., 2022; Chanlat, 2021). This commitment to local realities is further evident in calls for management research rooted in specific regional challenges rather than universalized abstractions.

Latin American journals also mount a strong critique of evaluation systems and rankings. They expose how JCR, Qualis (the Brazilian journal classification system used by CAPES to evaluate graduate programs), and similar metrics privilege English-language publications and systematically devalue scholarship

in other languages (Alves & Pozzebon, 2013). This not only reproduces global hierarchies but narrows creativity, reinforcing a “publish at any cost” mentality. Closely related is the distinctive treatment of translation: while global literature often presents translation as a technical step, Latin American authors highlight its political and epistemic dimensions. They lament the near absence of inverse translation (from non-English into English) (Alves & Pozzebon, 2013), emphasize the transformative nature of each act of translation (Valverde & Oliveira, 2023), and advocate practices such as reflexive use of English or retaining original terms with explanatory notes.

Another recurring theme is the depth of attention to linguistic and cultural nuances. Beyond cultural dimensions à la Hofstede, Latin American work stresses that language embodies entire worldviews and ways of knowing (Fonseca, 2011). This perspective foregrounds the *psychic distance paradox*—the possibility that even geographically close cultures may harbor profound, unperceived differences due to language and cultural specificity (Novais & do Nascimento, 2016).

Finally, the Latin American literature identifies the paradox of “publish in English or perish”. While global academia views English publication as the route to legitimacy and advancement, evidence from bilingual Brazilian journals suggests the opposite: publishing in English may reduce local impact by alienating non-English-speaking audiences (Foguesatto et al., 2023). This tension particularly disadvantages younger researchers, who may struggle to gain recognition both locally and internationally (Cooke & Faria, 2013). In response, Latin American scholars actively describe strategies of resistance, from promoting multilingual journals (e.g., *M@n@gement*, *RAE*, *Management International*) (Chanlat, 2015) to building alliances with French-speaking colleagues to jointly challenge Anglophone dominance (Gantman et al., 2015).

Discussion

When we began this review, we expected to uncover new empirical insights into how language shapes management practice and scholarship in Latin America.

Instead, what we found was strikingly different. Very few studies addressed the organizational implications of language use, proficiency, or accents. Instead, much of the discussion concentrated on the dominance of English in business and academia. This absence is notable: despite Latin America's linguistic diversity—Spanish and Portuguese being spoken by hundreds of millions—questions of dialect, accent, or the hierarchies between regional varieties (such as Spanish *castellano* vs. Latin American dialects, and European vs. Brazilian Portuguese) were almost absent. This contrasts with contexts like Finland (Ristolainen et al., 2023) or France (Ramboarisata & Berrier-Lucas, 2025), where postcolonial histories and migration patterns have made language politics highly salient. The Latin American experience is more complicated. Up until the early decades of the twentieth century, the region was a major destination for immigrants: Brazil, for instance, became home to the largest Japanese community outside Japan, as well as large Italian, Lebanese, and other diasporas. From the 1970s onward, however, economic crises and political instability turned many Latin American countries into sources of emigration rather than primary destinations. This historical reversal may help explain why contemporary management journals in the region seem less attuned to issues of linguistic diversity: although migration has been central to Latin American history, recent decades have made outward rather than inward flows more visible in public and scholarly discourse.

Here, our findings resonate with international work that highlights how linguistic difference shapes both organizational careers and academic knowledge production. In organizational contexts, studies in the UK (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014) and Germany (Schmaus & Kristen, 2022) show that non-native English speakers often face discrimination in hiring and evaluation, regardless of their actual competence. Latin American authors push this discussion further into academia itself, pointing to a paradox that has not received much attention elsewhere: the dilemma of “publish in English or perish locally” (Foguesatto et al., 2023; Alves & Pozzebon, 2013).

The mechanism is subtle but consequential. Publishing in English is seen as the only route to enter the “global” academic conversation, yet success is far from guaranteed. Junior scholars in particular may find that their English-language articles receive little traction internationally, while simultaneously

drawing fewer citations and recognition from their local communities. As a result, they risk weakening both their international and domestic standing. Publishing in Portuguese or Spanish, on the other hand, preserves local impact but often ensures that those insights will never be heard on the bigger global stage. The paradox is therefore more profound than a simple trade-off: efforts to comply with the international system can actively undermine local scholarly careers. It underscores what Chanlat (2015, 2021) calls epistemic colonialism: the structural privileging of Anglophone knowledge systems that narrows what counts as legitimate scholarship.

The local vs. international publishing dilemma is even sharper when juxtaposed with findings from outside Latin America. Bashirzadeh, Meunier, and Mai (2025) show that students—arguably the primary beneficiaries of management scholarship—value diversity among professors and even evaluate international faculty more positively when they perceive greater cultural distance. Similarly, Tenzer and Pudelko (2017) demonstrate how relative proficiency and linguistic formality structure power dynamics in multinational teams, while Boussebaa and Morgan (2014) argue that multinationals reproduce neo-imperial hierarchies through language and management practices. Taken together, these studies suggest that organizational members and students are open to, and even benefit from, diverse linguistic and cultural voices. Yet the academic publishing system continues to penalize precisely those contributions, thereby reproducing inequality.

These findings raise both methodological and institutional challenges. On one hand, the creation of multilingual journals and bilingual outlets, such as *M@n@gement* or *RAE*, represents a form of resistance (Chanlat, 2015; Gantman et al., 2015). On the other hand, advances in digital tools and AI-based translation may make it increasingly feasible to publish articles in multiple languages, thereby reaching both local and international audiences. Wilmot and Tietze (2023) caution that translation is never a neutral act but an inherently political one; nevertheless, reflexive and creative approaches to translation (Valverde & Oliveira, 2023) could help reduce the epistemic asymmetries that our review has highlighted. For Latin America, as for other non-Anglophone regions, the challenge is not only to resist linguistic domination but also to

reimagine knowledge dissemination in ways that support both global dialogue and local impact.

Our review also speaks to the broader debate outlined in the introduction: the longstanding, culture-dominant frameworks in cross-cultural management versus the more recent language-sensitive approaches. The Latin American evidence suggests that these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Rather, language provides the interactional medium through which cultural meanings are expressed, negotiated, and sometimes constrained. In this sense, the regional contributions extend the language-sensitive agenda while highlighting how linguistic hierarchies, translation practices, and publishing pressures shape what counts as legitimate knowledge. These findings point toward a more integrated view, in which culture cannot be understood without attention to language, and where Latin American scholarship offers insights that help expand the global literature.

Future research

Our focus in this note was intentionally narrow. We limited our review to management journals published in Spanish and Portuguese across Latin America, reflecting both our linguistic competence and our familiarity with this regional scholarly context. This focus allowed us to identify and analyze relevant contributions with confidence, but it also means that other bodies of scholarship were left outside our scope. For example, language has been examined extensively in psychology and applied psychology (e.g., DeFranza et al., 2020; Kinzler, 2021), yet our expertise did not allow us to reliably evaluate the quality of those outlets or studies. Future research could build bridges across disciplinary boundaries, connecting management-focused language studies with insights from adjacent fields.

A promising next step would be to extend this type of literature search to other linguistic traditions beyond English, Spanish, and Portuguese. In particular, countries whose languages spread through imperial histories—such as France, Italy, and Russia—offer fertile ground for uncovering distinctive contributions.

Ramboarisata and Berrier-Lucas (2025), for instance, highlight the role of French in shaping global business practices, but many local perspectives remain underexplored. Just as our review surfaced Latin American critiques of Anglo-Saxon hegemony, parallel efforts in other linguistic regions could further pluralize the global conversation.

By systematically incorporating voices from diverse linguistic and cultural traditions, future scholarship can move closer to what Latin American authors describe as a *pluriversal* approach: an epistemic orientation that values the coexistence of multiple ways of knowing rather than privileging one dominant perspective (Chanlat, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2022). We see this as both a methodological challenge and a moral imperative, one that aligns directly with the aims of this special issue.

Conclusion

In the past two decades, language has gained long-overdue visibility in management research. Once primarily the concern of international business outlets such as the *Journal of International Business Studies* and the *Journal of International Management*, language is now increasingly present in mainstream journals, including the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Management*, and *Journal of Management Studies*. This shift reflects a growing recognition that language is not peripheral but constitutive of organizational life. Ironically, while the impact of language barriers on knowledge flows has been widely examined in the context of multinational corporations (Tenzer et al., 2021), much less attention has been devoted to language barriers within management academia itself. Despite repeated calls to investigate language diversity in contexts beyond Western corporations (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017), such studies remain scarce.

Our review suggests that local academic discourse on language in management remains relatively weak in volume but not in insight. Latin American scholarship offers distinctive critical perspectives—particularly around epistemic colonialism, translation, and the paradoxes of publishing in

English—that enrich the global conversation. By surfacing these contributions, this research note seeks not only to amplify underrepresented voices but also to remind us that the politics of language extend into the very structures of management knowledge production.

In closing, we see this as an invitation: to scholars across linguistic and geographic contexts, to explore how language both enables and constrains organizational life, and to take seriously the challenge of building a more inclusive, reflexive, and pluriversal management scholarship.

References

Abduljawad, S. (2023). Social development strategies of English as second language learners for international management. *Revista De Gestão Social E Ambiental*, 17(7), 1–20.

Alcadipani, R. (2017). Periódicos brasileiros em inglês: A mímica do publish or perish global. *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 57, 405–411.

Alves, M. A., & Pozzebon, M. (2013). How to resist linguistic domination and promote knowledge diversity? *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 53, 629–633.

Bashirzadeh, Y., Meunier, L., & Mai, R. (2025). Do Business School Students Value Faculty Diversity? Insights From a Dyadic Analysis of Students' Evaluations of Teaching. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, in press.

Boussebaa, M., & Morgan, G. (2014). Pushing the frontiers of critical international business studies: The multinational as a neo-imperial space. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 10(1/2), 96–106.

Brannen, M. Y., & Salk, J. E. (2000). Partnering across borders: Negotiating organizational culture in a German-Japanese joint venture. *Human Relations*, 53(4), 451–487.

Carrió Pastor, M. L., & Muñiz Calderón, R. (2010). Variations in business English letters written by non-native writers. *LFE. Revista de Lenguas para Fines Específicos*, 15/16, 39–56.

Chanlat, J. F. (2014). A língua e o pensar no campo da pesquisa em administração. *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 54(6), 706–714.

Chanlat, J. F. (2015). The Field Of Organizational Studies: Critical Eye Of A Multilingual Researcher. *Rae-Revista De Administracao De Empresas*, 55(2), 226–230.

Chanlat, J. F. (2021). The Influence of French Language Thought on the Brazilian Administrative Sciences: A Quebec French look. *Rae-Revista De Administracao De Empresas*, 61(3), NA-NA.

Cooke, B., & Faria, A. (2013). Development, Management and North Atlantic Imperialism: For Eduardo Ibarra Colado. *Cadernos Ebape. Br*, 11, I–XV.

De Stefani, D., & Azevêdo, A. (2014). A Linguagem Gerencial Analisada à Luz da Teoria dos Atos de Fala de JL Austin: estudo do pensamento de Peter Drucker. *Revista de Ciências da Administração*, 16(40), 173–190.

DeFranza, D., Mishra, H., & Mishra, A. (2020). How language shapes prejudice against women: An examination across 45 world languages. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 119(1), 7–22.

Faustino, H. C., & Proença, I. (2015). Immigration and intra-industry trade: The relevance of language, qualification and economic integration. *European Journal of Management Studies*, 20(1), 3–17.

Ferreira, D. D. M., de Oliveira, M. C., Borba, J. A., & Schappo, F. (2022). Do Brazilian researchers in graduate accounting programs publish in English? An exploratory study. *Accounting Education*, 31(4), 431–451.

Foguesatto, C. R., Müller, F. M., & Wegner, D. (2023). Publish (in Portuguese) or Perish? Analyzing Brazilian Bilingual Journals of Business Management. *Analyzing Brazilian Bilingual Journals of Business Management* (March 18, 2023).

Fonseca, A. C. P. D. (2011). Comunicação intercultural em uma empresa transnacional: a visão dos brasileiros sobre sua comunicação com os norte-americanos. *Cadernos EBAPE. BR*, 9, 1099–1121.

Gantman, E. R., Yousfi, H., & Alcadipani, R. (2015). Challenging Anglo-Saxon dominance in management and organizational knowledge. *Revista de Administração de Empresas*, 55(2), 126–129.

Hideg, I., Shen, W., & Hancock, S. (2022). What is that I hear? An interdisciplinary review and research agenda for non-native accents in the workplace. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 43(2), 214–235.

Kalra, K., & Szymanski, M. (2023). Alike yet distinct: The effect of language diversity on interpersonal relationships within national and multinational project teams. *Management and Organization Review*, 19(4), 627–654.

Kinzler, K. D. (2021). Language as a social cue. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 72(1), 241–264.

Kogut, B., & Singh, H. (1988). The effect of national culture on the choice of entry mode. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 19(3), 411–432.

Marschan-Piekkari, R., Welch, D., & Welch, L. (1999). Adopting a common corporate language: IHRM implications. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 10(3), 377–390.

Meyer, K. E., Li, J., & Brouthers, K. D. (2023). International business in the digital age: Global strategies in a world of national institutions. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 54(4), 577.

Neeley, T., & Kaplan, R. S. (2014). What's your language strategy? *Harvard Business Review*, 92(9), 70–76.

Novais, A. L. M., & do Nascimento João, B. (2016). Cultural influences on entry mode choice in international business: An assessment and review. *Gestão e Projetos: GeP*, 7(1), 1–14.

Oliveira, S. A. D., & Bulgacov, Y. L. M. (2013). Wittgenstein e a administração: potencialidades da pragmática da linguagem aos estudos organizacionais e à estratégia. *Revista de Administração Contemporânea*, 17, 556–573.

Peltokorpi, V. (2022). Headhunter-assisted recruiting practices in foreign subsidiaries and their (dys) functional effects: An institutional work perspective. *Journal of World Business*, 57(6), 101366.

Piekhari, R., & Tietze, S. (2014). Micropolitical behavior in the multinational enterprise: A language perspective. In *Multinational enterprises, markets and institutional diversity* (pp. 259–277). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Ramboarisata, L., & Berrier-Lucas, C. (2025). Language hegemony revisited: insights from the francophone world. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 21(5), 625–657.

Ristolainen, J., Outila, V., & Piekhari, R. (2023). Reversal of language hierarchy and the politics of translation in a multinational corporation. *Critical perspectives on International Business*, 19(1), 6–26.

Rosa, A. R., & Alves, M. A. (2011). Can management and organization knowledge speak Portuguese?/Pode o conhecimento em gestão e organização

falar Portugues?/? Puede el conocimiento en gestion y organizacion hablar Portugues? *Rae-Revista De Administracao De Empresas*, 51(3), 255–265.

Schmaus, M., & Kristen, C. (2022). Foreign Accents in the Early Hiring Process: A Field Experiment on Accent-Related Ethnic Discrimination in Germany. *International Migration Review*, 56, 562–593.

Śliwa, M., & Johansson, M. (2014). How non-native English-speaking staff are evaluated in linguistically diverse organizations: A sociolinguistic perspective. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 45(9), 1133–1151.

Szymanski, M., & Brighi, C. (2025). “Do you understand me correctly?” The role of accents in communication in global virtual teams. *Journal of International Management*, 31(2), 101221.

Tavares, R. R. (2005). Linguagem, cultura e imagem na pesquisa qualitativa: interpretando caleidoscópios sociais. *Cadernos EBAPE. BR*, 3, 1–13.

Tenzer, H. & Pudelko, M. (2017). The influence of language differences on power dynamics in multinational teams. *Journal of World Business*, 52, 45–61.

Tenzer, H., Pudelko, M., & Zellmer-Bruhn, M. (2021). The impact of language barriers on knowledge processing in multinational teams. *Journal of World Business*, 56(2), 101184.

Tietze, S., & Dick, P. (2013). The victorious English language: Hegemonic practices in the management academy. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 22(1), 122–134.

Tietze, S., Piekhari, R., & Brannen, M. Y. (2014). From standardisation to localisation: Developing a language-sensitive approach to IHRM. In *The Routledge Companion to International Human Resource Management* (pp. 482–495). Routledge.

Toledo Sarracino, D. G. (2023). The Language Policy Of Learning English As Support To The Internationalization Management Of Universidad Autónoma De Baja California [Mexico]. *Environmental & Social Management Journal/Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental*, 17(2), e03428.

Valverde, J. M., & Oliveira, S. A. D. (2023). Translating management ideas: consultants as language artificers. *Cadernos EBAPE. BR*, 21(2), e2022-0167.

Vigier, M., & Bryant, M. (2023). Contextual and linguistic challenges for French business schools to achieve international accreditation: experts as boundary-spanners. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 19(1), 70–89.

Vigier, M., & Bryant, M. (2025). Language inequalities and business school accreditation: voices from non-English-speaking countries. *Higher Education*, 1–33.

Wilmot, N. V., & Tietze, S. (2023). Englishization and the politics of translation. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 19(1), 46–69.

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0016

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Silvana Tode Neshkovska

Faculty of Education, University St. Kliment Ohridski, Bitola, North Macedonia

silvana.neshkovska@uklo.edu.mk

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4417-7783

Crisis Leadership: Language, Power, and the Construction of Legitimacy in War Narratives

Article history:

Received 19 November 2025

Revised 23 November 2025

Accepted 24 November 2025

Available online 16 December 2025

Abstract: Focusing on wartime narratives, this study demonstrates how language functions as a tool of power and legitimacy, revealing discursive

patterns that operate not only in politics but also in corporate and institutional contexts.

Using a qualitative CDA approach, the paper analyses how political leaders employ language during crises to justify decisions and manage military operations. Through comparative analysis of recent scholarship and our examination of speeches and statements by top political figures involved in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the study identifies conflict framings, recurring themes, linguistic choices, and rhetorical devices used to legitimise “Us” and delegitimise “Them”. The findings indicate that crisis leaders rely heavily on the victim–savior dichotomy, constructing “Us” through themes of victimhood and moral superiority, and depicting “Them” through savagery, and moral decline—compounded by marked evaluative lexis, specific syntactic patterns, and frequent rhetorical devices.

The paper argues that understanding how leaders construct wartime narratives to justify violence can enhance awareness of analogous discursive strategies in organisational crisis contexts and support more ethical, transparent, and responsible communication practices.

Keywords: narratives, framing, crisis leadership, “Us vs. Them” dichotomy, wartime political discourse

Introduction

The relationship between language, power and politics is deeply intertwined, particularly in times of crisis. Large-scale conflicts, whether driven by political, social, religious, or territorial motives, are waged with words as much as with weapons. History shows that wars are frequently preceded by verbal confrontations over values and claims to status, power, and resources (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024), which ultimately erupt into physical aggression. During wartime, political and military leaders continuously engage in verbal interactions; once violence subside, they again turn to language through negotiations to resolve the issues that sparked the conflicts.

Politicians use language as their primary vehicle for articulating ideas, intentions, and sentiments. Political discourse thus becomes an instrument capable of sustaining peace or provoking conflict (Chiluwa & Ruzaita, 2024). In wartime, it serves purposes far beyond information exchange—it shapes public consciousness, guides collective perception (Gomaa, 2023), reinforces national identities, constructs enemies and legitimizes military operations (Bouka, 2025). As Lehman & Grint (2024: 8) note “rhetoric is not simply a tool for persuasion but a mechanism through which leaders and followers jointly create meaning”.

Unsurprisingly, much research has examined how official representatives employ language to justify wars. These discursive practices constitute a form of crisis leadership, in which political actors must construct legitimacy, manage public emotions, and sustain collective resolve. Although operating on a more consequential scale, this logic mirrors communicative practices in organizational settings, where leaders also use narratives to frame crises, allocate responsibility, and mobilise coordinated action. Succinctly put, “the use of language in institutional contexts is related to power and serves the interests of those who hold it” too (Lehman, 2024: 3). Leaders, in general, are engaged in social practices and are concerned with the same vital concepts for achieving effective communication—meaning and framing; reflexivity and moral accountability (ethics), and relationality and dialogue (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, in Lehman, 2024). Recognising and foregrounding this parallel can amplify the need for ethical crisis communication and responsible leadership overall.

This study examines political discourse in two major ongoing military conflicts: the war in Ukraine and the war in Gaza. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study investigates how high-ranking political leaders construct wartime narratives to legitimise decisions, sustain group identity, and justify military actions with far-reaching human consequences.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The theoretical background outlines the analytical framework, briefly introducing CDA, the concepts of framing and narratives, and the “Us vs. Them” legitimisation strategy. The subsequent sections present the research methodology, contextual information on the two conflicts, and an analysis and a discussion of the findings. The paper concludes with key insights and recommendations for future research.

Theoretical background

The analysis of political discourse in contemporary studies shows that CDA remains the dominant analytical framework. CDA examines the hidden meanings embedded in discourse by considering power relations and the socio-political contexts in which discourse is produced. Its central concern is to reveal how politicians use language to construct social realities, and how these realities, in turn, shape political discourse (van Dijk, 2006; Fairclough, 1995). Much research on political discourse draws on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA, which includes: (1) textual analysis, (2) discursive practice, and (3) social practice, and on van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive approach which, similarly, links the microstructure of language use (lexis, grammar, discourse strategies) to the macrostructure of culture (power, dominance, and inequality). The Ideological Square proposed by van Dijk's (2006) is particularly relevant for identifying positive self-representation and negative other-representation strategies ("Us vs. Them" polarization), whereby political actors highlight "our" good actions and "their" bad ones, while downplaying unfavourable information about the in-group and the positive actions of the out-group. This "Us vs. Them" polarization which is employed to portray the in-group as moral, defensive, or humane, while the out-group as aggressive, illegitimate, or threatening is, in fact, one of the primary strategies used in political discourse for legitimising war (Oddo, 2011). Politicians 'build' this strategy through carefully selected lexical choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices, designed to provoke emotional reactions such as fear, anger, hope, or pride (D'Ambrosio, 2022, in Serafimovska et al., 2024), which, in turn, can trigger public behavior which is aligned with their political agendas (Serafimovska et al., 2024).

Additionally, research on political discourse relies extensively on two closely related concepts—framing and political narratives. Framing refers to how political actors present information selectively, emphasising certain aspects of an issue while obscuring other aspects, thereby shaping what becomes salient in a public debate (Serafimovska et al., 2024). Frames in political discourse are important as they "guide perception, decision-making, and behavior"

(Goffman, 1974, in Serafimovska et al., 2024). In Foucault's terms (1976/1979), discourse not only shapes thought but also frames certain claims as “truths”, marginalizing alternative perspectives (in Lehman & Grint, 2024). Entman (1993) defines framing as selecting particular aspects of a perceived reality to promote a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation.

Political narratives, on the other hand, present a much more detailed political account of an event which involves characters positioned in time and space (Van Hulst, 2025). Narratives are not simply the telling of facts; they may include elements of history, ideology, or cultural values as well as politicians' own perspectives, values, and interpretations (Shenhav, 2006). Politicians with their narratives aim to persuade and mobilize the public, influence the understanding of reality, shape public opinion, legitimize political agendas and alter relationships between social groups and individuals (Shenhav, 2006). Political narratives are very efficient in engaging emotions and can be used to persuade people towards positive goals such as justice, equality and sustainability, or, conversely, towards negative goals such as terrorism, authoritarianism and violence (Braddock & Hogan, 2016, in Serafimovska et al., 2024).

Research Methodology

The primary goal of this study is to deepen our understanding of the relationship between politics, power, and language, and to identify recurrent rhetorical strategies in political discourse during military crises, regardless of differing social, cultural, historical, or geopolitical contexts. The key research questions guiding this study are: (1) What frames do political leaders employ in their narratives to justify turning to arms in times of crisis? and (2) What themes and discursive means—linguistic and rhetorical—do politicians use to legitimise “Us” and delegitimise “Them”? Gaining insight into these mechanisms can also contribute to a broader understanding of crisis communication and leadership in organisational and institutional contexts, where leaders, too, “must skillfully

navigate ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logic) to align individual goals with broader organizational objectives ... to resolve conflicts, articulate visions, and foster relational cohesion” (Lehman & Grint, 2024: 8).

Drawing on CDA, more specifically, on Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional model and on van Dijk’s Ideological Square (2006), this research compares and contrasts the political discourse of the highest-ranking officials involved in two ongoing military conflicts: Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the war in Ukraine, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and key Hamas representatives in the war in Gaza. The analysis combines two complementary data sources. First, it draws on the findings of recent mostly CDA-based studies that examine the political discourse of these leaders. Specifically, the studies of Alnwihe & Al-Abbas (2023), Bouka (2025), Soukni (2025), Minawi (2024), Shalev (2025), and Klein (2024) provide insights into the discourse surrounding the Israel–Hamas war, while the works of Babatunde & Onmoke (2025), Abbadi et al. (2024), Gomaa (2023), and Hasan (2025) analyse discursive strategies used in the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. Second, this study conducts its own CDA of political statements and official addresses delivered by Putin, Zelenskyy, Netanyahu, and Hamas representatives from the onset of each conflict and throughout its progression. These primary texts were selected through purposive sampling based on their political relevance, official nature, and impact on public understanding of the conflict. Analysing this corpus alongside the findings of existing scholarship allows for a more robust identification of shared rhetorical patterns and conflict-framing strategies across different geopolitical contexts.

The analysis unfolds in three main stages. First, concise background information is provided on the circumstances that led to the outbreak of each conflict, as understanding the context in which political discourse transpires is of paramount importance. Second, the narratives constructed by political leaders at the onset and throughout the progression of the conflict are examined, with attention to how military action is discursively justified. Third, the study identifies recurring themes that underpin these narratives, including existential threats, selective historical references, appeals to religion, moral superiority, fear, collective identity, etc. Particular focus is placed on how crisis leaders construct

the “Us vs. Them” legitimisation strategy through specific linguistic (lexical and syntactic) and rhetorical (e.g., metaphorical language) devices to shape public perception and mobilise support during wartime. Lastly, the study highlights the importance of drawing analogies between political crisis management through linguistic means and the strategies employed by leaders in organisations and institutions to legitimise high-stakes decisions, influence group behaviour, and reinforce hierarchical authority.

Results

Background information on the two conflicts

Ukraine and Russia share a long and complex history shaped by their coexistence within the Soviet Union. Following Ukraine’s independence in 1991, the two countries pursued diverging geopolitical orientations: Ukraine increasingly aligned itself with the West, while Russia continued to view Ukraine as part of its historical and cultural sphere of influence (Bouka, 2025; Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). Tensions escalated with the 2013–2014 Maidan protests, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and the outbreak of the conflict in Donbas, where pro-Russian separatist groups, assisted by Russia, started fighting for independence from Ukraine. The current phase of the war began in February 2022, when Russia, first, recognized the independence of the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, and, then, launched a “special military operation” framed as an effort to “de-Nazify” and “demilitarize” Ukraine (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). Russian political discourse often portrays Russians and Ukrainians as “one people”, a narrative that, as Mankoff (2022) notes, implicitly challenges Ukraine’s sovereignty and historical identity. By contrast, Ukrainian leaders frame the conflict as a struggle to defend their territory, independence, and right to exist (Abbadi et al., 2024; Hasan, 2025).

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is rooted in decades of territorial and political contestation, often traced back to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent displacement of Palestinians, which triggered a protracted

circle of violence over land and predominance. On the other hand, although Gaza has been formally recognized as “autonomous” since 2005, following Israel’s withdrawal, its borders remained largely under Israeli control (Bouka, 2025). The most recent escalation began on 7 October 2023, when Hamas, the militant wing of the religious nationalist group governing Gaza since 2006, launched the “al-Aqsa Flood Operation” as a sign of resistance, killing approximately 1,200 people and taking over 250 hostages. Israel responded immediately by declaring war on Hamas, aiming to dismantle its military and governing structures, and secure the release of hostages. The ensuing large-scale military operations, which included airstrikes, ground incursions, and a blockade, produced a severe humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. International criticism has focused on the disproportionate use of force by Israel, while Hamas has been condemned too for attacks on civilians and for embedding military infrastructure in densely populated areas. As of late 2025, the conflict is still largely unresolved, with significant humanitarian, political, and geopolitical implications (Elmali, n.d.).

The framing of the conflicts in the political narratives

Putin vs. Zelensky

The analyses of Putin’s public speeches and statements since the war began point to several recurrent frames. The first presents Russia not as an aggressor but as a savior, engaged in a defensive, liberating mission. He labels the invasion as a “special military operation”, claiming that it is intended to protect the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine and to overthrow the “neo-Nazi” Ukrainian regime. Putin frames the invasion as necessary, arguing that inaction would constitute a betrayal of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine (Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2024). He repeatedly uses the terms “de-Nazification” and “de-militarization”, implying that Ukraine’s government is a neo-Nazi military dictatorship, guilty of humiliating and committing genocide against the people of Donetsk and Luhansk:

The purpose of the operation is to protect people subjected to abuse and genocide by the Kyiv Regime for eight years. We will strive to clean Ukraine from Nazism and militarism and bring to justice those who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation.

Thus, he places responsibility for the war on the Ukrainian government (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024) and asserts that, as a nation that once fought against Nazism, Russia has a duty to continue that struggle today (Bouka, 2025). His use of the terms “de-Nazification” and “special military operation” is interpreted as an attempt to soften the harsh reality of the war (BBC News, 2022, in Hasan, 2025).

The second related frame in Putin’s narrative casts Russia as a victim of Western aggression: “the conflict... instigated by the West” (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025). Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, according to Putin, is a response to NATO’s expansion into Ukraine. In his view, Western liberalism, individualism, and secularism are fundamentally incompatible with Russian values rooted in tradition, collectivism, and Orthodox Christianity (Bouka, 2025). Hence, he portrays the growing influence of the West and NATO in Ukraine as an orchestrated attack on Russia. Thus, he shifts the blame for the conflict away from Russia (Hasan, 2025) and accuses the “collective West” of trying to “put the final squeeze on us, finish us off, and utterly destroy us”. This narrative suggests that Russia’s sovereignty and survival are under an existential threat, and Russia’s ‘operation’ in Ukraine is a defensive necessity (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025; Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024).

Research on Zelensky’s narrative and framing has shown that from the first Russian attack onwards, in all his public addresses, Zelensky construes a narrative that is strategically designed to transcend national boundaries (Hasan, 2025; Gomaa, 2023). The central frame of his narrative is that Ukraine is a victim of an unprovoked assault by a more powerful neighbour and that it is fighting for survival: “Russia attacked us. Attacked, taking advantage of its military force” (Hasan, 2025). By framing Russia’s actions in a hostile light, Zelensky seeks to invoke a sense of urgency and alarm (“If our lives, our freedom,

our children are attacked, we will defend ourselves”). Zelensky’s narrative reflects the fear, pain, and trauma experienced by the Ukrainian people in the face of military hostility (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025), and simultaneously serves as a call for international support (Hasan, 2025). Interestingly, this call for support is not framed as an appeal for charity, as Zelensky skillfully frames Ukraine as a defender/savior of universal principles—democracy, safety, justice, and sovereignty, arguing that Ukraine is defending not just itself but democratic “European values” at large (Hasan, 2025).

Netanyahu and Hamas

Netanyahu’s narrative frames Israel’s military response in Gaza as a defensive and morally justified reaction to an existential terrorist threat. The predominant frame in his narrative depicts their military operations as a defensive response to an existential threat coming from savage terrorists: “Citizens of Israel, we are at war. Not an operation, not a round [of fighting,] at war! ... The enemy will pay an unprecedented price” (Netanyahu, 2023). Thus, in his political narrative, the war is considered a necessary move and a moral obligation on the part of the Israelis (Bouka, 2025; Soukni, 2025). Just like Putin, Netanyahu also reinforces his narrative by bringing the Nazism and the Holocaust to the foreground. He draws parallels to the immense tragedy experienced by the Jews during WWII and the tragedy of the October 7 attack.

Additionally, like Zelensky, Netanyahu expands the frame of his narrative by claiming that Israel fights in defense of the global moral and democratic values, i.e., Israel is a defender/savior of the rest of the civilized world (Soukni, 2025): “Yes, we’re defending ourselves, but we’re also defending you against a common enemy” (Netanyahu, 2024). By shifting the blame to Hamas completely, he is also attributing the terrific loss of civilian lives and humanitarian crisis in Gaza to Hamas using its own people as a “human shield” and operating from densely populated areas.

In the aftermath of October 7, Hamas too, undertook a deliberate discursive effort to legitimize their actions through an official document titled *Our Narrative—Operation al-Aqsa Flood* (Our narrative... Operation Al-Aqsa Flood,

n.d.). Through the narrative laid out in this document, Hamas attempts to reframe itself as a rational political actor rather than as a terrorist organization driven by religious extremism (Klein, 2024). Central to this narrative is Hamas's portrayal of October 7 as an act of resistance against a prolonged colonial occupation ("In light of the ongoing Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and as our people continue their battle for independence, dignity and breaking-free from the longest-ever occupation..."). The group situates its actions within a historical continuum of anti-colonial struggle, arguing that Zionism displaced Palestinians from their homeland and that Israel's ongoing blockade of Gaza, expansion of settlements, and rejection of Palestinian statehood have forced them to violent confrontation ("Over these long decades, the Palestinians have suffered all forms of oppression, injustice, expropriation of their fundamental rights and the apartheid policies"). In this framing, violence becomes reactive rather than aggressive, or even a moral necessity aimed at self-defense and liberation, aligned with the international laws (Klein, 2024). Also, in this document, Hamas attempts to distance itself from anti-Semitism and civilian harm during the 7 October attack, framing unintended deaths as chaos caused by the sudden and total collapse of the Israeli defense system (Klein, 2024; Alnwihe & Al-Abbas, 2023).

However, the public statements of a number of Hamas officials, released prior and after October 7, reveal another more absolutist frame in Hamas's narrative—their holy fight is not just for overthrowing the oppression of Israel, but for destruction of the Zionist state. Thus, they claim they would free not just the land that rightfully belongs to the Palestinians but the world at large of an entity which has caused a lot of sufferings and misfortunes globally. As stated by Islamic scholar Hussein Qasem: "The Jews are not the enemies of the Palestinians alone—they are the enemies of humanity as a whole..." (Shalev, 2025). Framed like this, the narrative suggests that Hamas representatives too, perceive themselves as saviors of the Palestinians and the world at large.

Political leaders' use of framing in their narratives closely mirrors the mechanisms described in transformational leadership theory. In organisations and institutions, transformational leaders shape how followers perceive situations by projecting compelling visions and their interpretations

of reality in order to guide employees to “see” an issue through a particular prism (Tyssen, et. al., 2014, in Johansson, 2015). This, understandably, alleviates the process of decision-making and managing an institution. Similarly, politicians strategically frame crises or conflicts to construct preferred meanings and to secure public alignment with their goals both at home and abroad.

“Us vs. Them” legitimisation strategy

Putin vs. Zelensky

In moulding “Us”, Putin depicts Russia as a bastion of traditional values, a morally and culturally superior nation, a defender of peace, truth and family. The positive lexis used to describe “Us” is evident from his first address after the start of the war. In this speech, aimed primarily at Russian soldiers and a divided domestic public, he deliberately uses expressions such as “dear compatriots”, “comrade officers”, and “citizens of Russia, friends” to foster nationhood, patriotism, and collective solidarity (Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2024). He commends the Russian soldiers for their patriotism and professionalism (“I am confident that the soldiers and officers ... will professionally and courageously fulfil their duty”). Through this strategy, Putin projects stability and control, suggesting that military actions are motivated not only by orders but also by shared nationalistic spirit. In crafting “Us”, he praises the entire Russian military apparatus for its technological superiority, using expressions such as “no means of countering such weapons today”, “one of the most powerful nuclear states”, etc. This invocation simultaneously functions as a threat, aimed at creating fear in the “Other”: “Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen...” (Hasan, 2025).

Conversely, in “Othering” Ukraine, Putin primarily targets the Ukrainian political elite (“the Kyiv regime”) depicting them as “puppets” of the West, and “criminals” who plunder and humiliate Ukrainians. Notably, he avoids targeting the Ukrainians and instead urges them to oppose “the Junta”—the Ukrainian

government (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024; Bouka, 2025). The “Other” also subsumes NATO and the West, which in Putin’s narrative are portrayed as hypocritical, deceitful, hostile, morally corrupt and imbued with expansionist aspirations (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025; Bouka, 2025; Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024), threatening to degenerate and destroy ‘Us’: “...over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement ... In response ... we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail...” (Bouka, 2025). Putin’s positively laden expression “patiently trying” implies reasonableness and willingness to negotiate, which is contrasted with negative lexis used for the out-group—“cynical deception”, “cheating”, “lies”, “blackmail”, “deceived”, “conned”, for the purpose of demonization and accusation (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025; Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024).

Beyond lexical strategies, Putin employs other rhetorical devices too. In verbally attacking the West, he exaggerates the effects of the USA’s ‘war on terror’ in Libya, Iraq, and Syria, qualifying it as “fake” and “sham” and claiming that it has caused a “tremendous loss in human life, damage, destruction, and a colossal upsurge of terrorism”. Then, he contrasts it with Russia’s “peacekeeping” activities in eastern Ukraine, which he associates with safety and stability of the region (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). From the perspective of syntactic structure of sentences, Putin prefers long and elaborate sentences in his addresses, which are occasionally intercepted with syntactically incomplete sentences, used to amplify the persuasive effect of his claims (“Just lies and hypocrisy all around”). Occasionally, he embeds rhetorical questions too, for the same reason (“Where is justice and truth here?”).

The “Us vs. Them” dichotomy occupies central position in Zelensky’s narrative as well. In his discourse, Ukraine (“Us”) is a brave defender of freedom, sovereignty, and humanity, whereas Russia (“Them”) embodies a powerful aggressor and violator of international laws (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025). In delegitimizing the “Other”, Zelensky frames Russia as a bully that leverages its strength against a vulnerable neighbour, engaging in extortionate behaviour and using its nuclear and chemical arsenals to intimidate Ukraine and the world (“Russia is openly blackmailing the world with nuclear and chemical weapons!”). The negatively-laden word “blackmailing” is intended to invoke a strong moral

condemnation of Russia's actions (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025). He further erodes the legitimacy of the Russian army by attributing the feature of "lawlessness" to it (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025), and by using strong, emotionally charged, negative lexis to refer to the Russian soldiers—"terrorists", "war criminals", "bloodthirsty", "killers of children" (Gomaa, 2023). He describes their moral decadence in detail ("It is difficult to find a war crime that the occupiers have not committed..."). Like Putin, he avoids attacking the Russian population directly, portraying them as victims driven to poverty by their irresponsible leadership: "And the world of people who have been specially humiliated by their state for decades, specially driven into poverty and lawlessness" (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025).

In constructing "Us", Zelensky uses positive and neutral expressions such as "citizens", "lovers of freedom", "defending each other", "sacrificing their best men and women" to highlight the humaneness and suffering of Ukrainians (Gomaa, 2023). Ukraine is framed as an innocent victim of unprovoked aggression (Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025) and a nation committed to peace: "Ukraine did not choose the path of war. But Ukraine offers to return to peace" (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). Ukrainian soldiers are firmly part of "Us", and their bravery is juxtaposed with the violence of the Russian army ("Our Armed Forces are doing great... Our troops are fighting fierce battles in the suburbs of Kherson"). These statements, reinforced by parallel syntactic structures ("Today Russia attacked the entire territory of our state. And today our defenders have done a lot"), work to inspire confidence, patriotism, and hope among Ukrainians (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2024). Interestingly, in his appeal to the international community for support, Zelensky expands "Us" to include the democratic communities worldwide, framing Ukraine as an equal partner, not as a passive aid recipient: "we are fighting for the values of Europe and the world..." (Gomaa, 2023; Babatunde & Onmoke, 2025). Syntactically, Zelensky often resorts to short simple sentences, and ellipsis to convey a strong sense of urgency:

: You know what defense systems we need... You know how much depends
 : on the battlefield on the ability to use aircraft... To protect your people. Your
 : freedom. Your land. Aircraft that can help Ukraine. That can help Europe
 : (Gomaa, 2023).
 :

He frequently resorts to rhetorical questions to evoke empathy and moral reflection: “What do we hear today? What do we see at this hour?”, “How are you going to protect yourself while helping Ukraine so slowly?”, “What is this war against Ukrainian children in the nursery? Who are they? Are they Neo-Nazis too?” (Chiluwa & Ruzaitė, 2024).

Some of his rhetorical questions implicitly admonish even the international community for failing to act more promptly and diligently (“Are you prepared to dissolve the United Nations? Do you believe that the era of international law has passed?”). The use of metaphorical language is also skillfully embedded in his political narrative. For instance, in this same context in which he mildly and implicitly reprimands Europe for the lack of agility, he uses a synecdoche to ascribe a quality of a silent person who says nothing to the European leaders, when they should actively and urgently respond to the danger at hand (“Silent Europe, we do not see that you will do anything”). He also uses metaphors such as “our weapon is truth”, “this land is our truth” to imply that Ukraine has only one option left—to defend its sovereignty by fighting back.

Netanyahu vs. Hamas

For Netanyahu, Hamas is framed as an existential and perennial threat to Israel (Bouka, 2025). His discourse constructs a sharp moral binary in which Hamas is not merely an adversary but an embodiment of evil that must be eradicated. Netanyahu repeatedly uses negative lexis to describe the “Others” as “terrorists”, “inherently violent”, “barbaric”, and “uncivilized”, insisting that they are fully committed to the total destruction of Israel (Soukni, 2025). Following this logic, for Netanyahu, force becomes the only legitimate means to deal with the enemy: “In this battle between good and evil, there must be no equivocation” (Bouka, 2025). In recounting the events of October 7, Netanyahu uses highly negatively loaded language such as “unimaginable atrocities”, “savagely murdered”, “raped”, “mutilated”, etc., to arouse fury and disgust and to urge retaliation (“They savagely murdered 1,200 people. They raped and mutilated women. They beheaded men. They burned babies alive... It seems reminiscent of the Nazi Holocaust”). This emotional and evaluative language is further intensified with the use of

a historical allusion to the tragic destiny of millions of Jews in the WWII (“Nazi Holocaust”). The theme of past suffering as a rhetorical tactic aims to embed fear into the collective consciousness of Israelis, as fear in political discourse functions as a mechanism not only for triggering social mobilization but also for silencing critical thought and, in turn, reinforcing state power (Bouka, 2025).

Netanyahu transforms the “Us vs. Them” framework into an existential “Us or Them” binary. Thus, the “Other” is not merely different or hostile but it is constituted as the opposite of everything “we”, the in-group, stand for (Yancy et. al, 2024, in Bouka, 2025). Thus, the war against Hamas is one of survival, not choice (Bouka, 2025). The “Other” is demonized to such an extent that it is only logical that it should be expelled from the realm of legitimate life (“They are savages”). To amplify the feelings of fear and moral outrage not just in the Israelis but in the international community too, Netanyahu frequently draws analogies between Hamas and ISIS: “Hamas is ISIS. And just as the forces of civilization united to defeat ISIS, the forces of civilization must support Israel in defeating Hamas” (Bouka, 2025). By using a historical allusion to the tragedy of September 11 in the USA, he is evoking traumatic memories from the past, and transfers past anxieties to the present, positioning Hamas as a global enemy (Bouka, 2025).

Counterposed to the demonized “Other”, Netanyahu constructs a morally superior portrait of “Us”. Israel and the Jewish people are presented as innocent victims and virtuous defenders. He mobilizes collective identity and loyalty through the inclusive pronouns “we”, “us”, “our”, and expressions such as “our hostages”, “we demanded”, etc. as well as through historical allusions to the past sufferings of the Jews (“The state of the Jews arose from the ashes of the Holocaust...”). Thus, he does not just cast Israel in a positive light but justifies the uncompromising retaliatory measures they are undertaking in Gaza (Bouka, 2025). He does not shun from employing a blend of historical and religious elements in his legitimization strategy in order to depict “Us” as the only rightful owner of the area (“Don’t they know that the Land of Israel is where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob prayed, where Isaiah and Jeremiah preached and where David and Solomon ruled?...”), simultaneously, this strategy casts Palestinians as part of a broader Arab entity with no distinct national identity (Bouka, 2025). In his narrative, simple syntactic structures and ellipsis for a stronger persuasive

effect are noted too, alongside with metaphoric language aimed at threatening not just Israel's "arch enemy" but also all other "potential" enemies: "Once, the Jewish people were defenseless. No longer. ... We will exact a price that will be remembered by them and Israel's other enemies for decades to come" (Bouka, 2025).

Netanyahu further universalizes Israel's cause by presenting military operations as defending the "civilized world", using repetitive syntactic structures ("Yes, we're defending ourselves, but we're also defending you against a common enemy..."). This rhetoric encourages international partners to view Israeli actions as protective of global values. He heightens this framing with warnings realized via conditional sentences ("If Israel does not win, they will be next in the chain of barbarism", "if we don't stop them, they will come for you"), intended to invoke fear which, in turn, is expected to mobilize national and international unity through the instinct of self-preservation (Bouka, 2025). By extending the in-group to external allies ("the West", "partners in the Arab world") with positively laden words such as "partners", he implies that Israel's stance carries global legitimacy (Gomaa, 2023; Bouka, 2025). In other words, invoking external authority reinforces the persuasiveness of his speech, and, at the same time, silences alternative narratives: "...And I know in this that we have your support... And I want to assure you, that as we stand together, we will also prevail" (Gomaa, 2023; Bouka, 2025).

Metaphorical language is detected in Netanyahu's rhetoric too, especially in his attempts to vilify the enemy and depict them as merciless and ready to sacrifice their own people unscrupulously using them as "human shields" in order to "fuel its war machine". Netanyahu's rhetoric, however, often fails to make a clear distinction between Hamas and the wider Palestinian population, treating them all as the out-group, most probably in order to simplify his moral calculus and avoid accountability for the shockingly high number of civilian casualties (Bouka, 2025).

For Hamas, fighting Israel is a religiously sanctioned struggle ("jihad"), aimed at liberating Palestine (Janssen, 2009). In other words, Hamas views the Israeli soldiers as terrorists who have occupied their lands, so by fighting against Israel, they defend themselves, i.e. "Us" (Alnwihe & Al-Abbas, 2023).

The spokesperson of Hamas's military wing, Abu Obeida, consistently constructed his war rhetoric around the "Us vs. Them" dichotomy. "Us" represents the Palestinian people, portrayed as long-suffering victims of Israeli genocide and loyal partners in the resistance efforts (Minawi, 2024): "the world is bewildered by the ... strength of the people of Gaza" (Full Text of Abu Obeida's Speech, 2023). Hamas is depicted as a force of divine justice, resisting oppression on behalf of the Palestinians. Hamas's fighters are symbols of valor and dignity ("Our fighters are and have been engaged in fierce confrontations and direct clashes"), and are praised for their military achievements, metaphorically as "brave lions". This depiction is intended to inspire and reinforce the collective identity and spiritual endurance of the Palestinians and to vilify and instil fear in the enemy (Minawi, 2024). Overall, in construing "Us", the lexical choices in Obeida's discourse are highly deliberate, emphasizing positively connoted expressions that denote the courage, steadfastness, strength and sacrifice of Hamas fighters and the Palestinian people in general. His use of metaphorical language further strengthens this positive self-representation. Obeida describes the easiness of expelling Israel metaphorically as "sweeping the floor from the dust" and Gaza as a "graveyard" for Israeli soldiers. To underscore the theme of religion, he employs personification in which the blood of the fallen militants will witness the victory ("the blood of the injured or killed during the Gazan War as a witness of the victory"). Even the operation's name ("flood") is intended to metaphorically evoke overpowering terror in the heart of the "Other" (Minawi, 2024).

On the other hand, in his discourse "Them", i.e. Israel and the Jewish people are described as an embodiment of evil and moral corruption (Minawi, 2024). In the process of "Othering", he specifically addresses the Israeli government and soldiers by using negatively connoted terms such as "the Zionist enemy", "the enemy forces", "the Zionist regime":

Recently, the Zionist enemy began ground maneuvers across multiple fronts... The enemy forces are also present around the Beit Hanoun crossing and the vicinity of Beit Hanoun. The criminal enemy approached these fronts after more than 20 days of bombardment... (in Full text of Abu Obeida's speech, 2023)

and animal metaphors (“pigs”) to further heighten the dehumanization of the “Other” (Minawi, 2024).

Apart from Obaida, other Hamas’s representatives shared with the world their ideology regarding the war against Israel, both after and prior to the October 7 attack. In their public addresses, they too dehumanise the Jews and present them as enemies of Islam. They use highly degrading and insulting lexis in referring to them (“sons of pigs and monkeys”, “apes”). The war against the Jews who are depicted as corrupt, conniving and hostile to Muslims is portrayed as religious and existential in character. Hamas officials make explicit calls to killing the Jews and total destruction of Israel, describing it as a religious duty (in Shalev, 2025):

“This is the day that you make this criminal enemy understand that its time is up. [The Quran says:] ‘Kill them wherever you may find them...’ (Mohammed Deif).

“Israel is a country that has no place on our land ... We must remove that country ... The Al-Aqsa Flood [the October 7th massacre] is just the first time, and there will be a second, a third, a fourth” (Ghazi Hamad).

“The Jews are not the enemies of the Palestinians alone—they are the enemies of humanity as a whole... Why shouldn’t we be furious? Why shouldn’t we burn the ground under the Jews’ feet?” (Hussein Qasem).

“Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews” (Sheikh Hamad al-Regeb).

Unsurprisingly, given that Hamas is an organization based on strong religious foundations, many of the public statements of Hamas’s officials are religiously-imbued, and Hamas seeks divine help in carrying out their mission to exterminate the “Other”. To maximize the emotional impact, their discursive strategies include imperative sentences (“Kill them wherever you may find

them”), rhetorical questions (“Why shouldn’t we be furious? Why shouldn’t we burn the ground under the Jews’ feet?”), and repetitive syntactic patterns (“Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews. Oh Allah, enable us to get to the necks of the Jews”).

The strategy of positive self-representation and constructing an inclusive “Us” in political discourse resonates with contemporary approaches to institutional and organizational management, which increasingly move away from “traditional command-and-control management”—now considered outdated—and instead advocate for leadership roles centred on facilitation, dialogue, and collaboration. In these models, the leader is reconceptualized as “a coach and facilitator of dialogue” (Raelin, 2013, in Johansson, 2015: 84), and employees are encouraged to voice their opinions and participate in decision-making, which increases their sense of empowerment (Johansson, 2015). Similarly, political leaders use inclusive “Us” strategy to project an image of shared purpose and participatory engagement, even when actual decision-making remains centralized.

On the other hand, in organizations too, delegitimizing “Them” or othering often emerges—intentionally or not—from relational and bureaucratic tensions, where those with more power marginalize individuals who are vulnerable or dependent on the institution for their survival (Bach, 2005: 259). In essence, assigning someone to the status of “Other” serves to disenfranchise and discount them. Stewart and Logan (1993, in Bach, 2005) outline how this occurs: those who are othered are treated as interchangeable, emotionless, incapable of reflection, and passive or unable to make choices. A similar mechanism operates in political discourse, where leaders—especially in times of crisis—intentionally construct and delegitimize a threatening “Them” to justify their actions and consolidate support from the inclusive “Us”.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the predominant narratives shows that, despite the significant historical, geographical, and socio-political differences, politicians

who have the roles of crisis leaders amidst the two wars in question here, tend to employ remarkably similar framing in their narratives to justify participation in war. Each side portrays itself as a victim rather than an aggressor, even in the case of Russia and Hamas, the parties that initiated the confrontations discussed in this study. Their narrative consistently frames military engagement as a response to an existential threat endangering their people, national sovereignty, freedom, justice, and democracy. This justification is further reinforced through the savior/defender frame, suggesting that their struggle transcends national boundaries and protects not only themselves but others as well. Violence is thus discursively legitimized as serving a greater good.

As to the “Us vs. Them” legitimization strategy, the analysis shows that it is deployed in all political narratives in strikingly similar ways. Regardless of who initiated the conflict, each side constructs a positive self-representation grounded in themes of victimhood and innocence, existential threat, moral superiority, altruism, military competence, patriotism, and past suffering. Conversely, the “Other” is associated with the themes of savagery, morally decadence, and global danger. Although the narratives occasionally make selective historical and religious allusions, politicians consistently avoid discussing the deeper roots and causes of the conflicts, foregrounding only selected events that justify the current escalation. None of these crisis leaders touches on themes of guilt, apology, self-criticism, or acceptance of responsibility. A noteworthy difference is that in the Israel-Hamas conflict, the “Us vs. Them” dichotomy becomes more radical, and shifts into an “Us or Them” binary that implies the total annihilation of the irredeemable “Other”. Religion here plays a central role, openly sanctifying war as a holy duty. In contrast, in the Russia-Ukraine war, political leaders largely refrain from making religious allusions or from explicitly celebrating the extermination of the opposing population. The findings further indicate that the “Us vs. Them” strategy is carefully constructed through a variety of discursive means such as positively and negatively connoted lexis, repetitive syntactic structures, ellipsis, rhetorical questions, metaphors, exaggeration, contrast, allusions, etc., used for greater persuasive effect. Together, these linguistic and rhetorical devices produce highly emotional and evaluative language aimed at instilling fear in the “Others” in order to deter them from

further fighting and resistance, but also in “Us”, as fear strengthens loyalty and suppresses dissent within the in-group. Thus, paradoxically, what political figures in general seem to suggest in their wartime narratives is that violence can only be stopped with more violence, before language and diplomacy are permitted to take center stage, and that “our” violence is somehow “redemptive” and “not-violent” as it serves a greater purpose than “Theirs”.

Given that “leadership is not simply about individuals in positions of authority, but a complex social construction continuously shaped through discourse” (Lehman & Grint, 2024: 11), the discursive techniques identified here extend beyond the political sphere. They resonate with organizational and institutional crisis communication, where managers often portray their actions as necessary responses to existential threats to organizational stability, identity, or values. Leaders frequently position their group as defenders of institutional integrity, thereby legitimizing tough decisions such as restructuring, disciplinary action, or strategic shifts. The organizational leaders often craft narratives that emphasize their own integrity and competence while attributing conflict or failure to external actors, previous leadership, or uncontrollable circumstances (Roulet & Pitchler, 2020; Fairhurst, 2011; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2004).

Further research is essential to explore other legitimisation strategies used by crisis leaders, and the evolution of the narratives and conflict framings as the conflicts progress and ultimately are put to a halt. The discourse of mediators seeking to bring conflicting parties to the negotiating table likewise merits more scholarly attention. Moreover, given that political communication, and, consequently, organizational communication increasingly thrives on social media nowadays, digital platforms represent a promising avenue for future research. Finally, this line of inquiry could be expanded by examining specific parallels with conflict escalation and resolution in political and institutional environments, particularly how leadership communication shapes conflict trajectories and influences whether disputes move toward negotiation or entrenchment.

Hopefully, the insights gained from this study, which highlight the deliberate use of rhetorical strategies by politicians during wartime, will contribute to a deeper understanding of how crisis leaders’ narratives, in general, justify high-stakes decisions. Additionally, they may support the development of more

ethical crisis communication practices that prioritize reducing polarization, avoiding dehumanization of the out-group and preventing conflict escalation, while promoting more inclusive and morally responsible leadership in times of crisis.

References

- Abbadi, R., Kreishan, L., & Al Saidat, M. E. (2024).** Discourse and language of war: A comparison of the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed in Russian, United States, and Ukrainian presidential speeches. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 13(1), 40–60.
- Alnwihe, K. H., & Al-Abbas, S. L. (2023).** The Representation of Gaza War (2021) in the Official Remarks of Hamas and Israel: A Critical Discourse Study. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 13(12), 3311–3318.
- Babatunde, S. A., & Onmoke, A. E. (2025).** Conflict-Motivated Speech: An Appraisal Contrastive Analysis of Putin's and Zelensky's Speeches. *LASU Journal of Humanities*, 17(2).
- Bach, W. B. (2005).** The Organizational Tension of Othering. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 33(3), 258–268.
- Bouha, P. (2025).** Israel's political discourse justifying its actions towards Palestinians. MA Middle Eastern Studies Thesis. Leiden University, the Netherlands. Retrieved from <https://studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A4259961/view>. Accessed 9 October 2025.
- Chiluwa, I. & Ruzaité, J. (2024).** Analysing the language of political conflict: a study of war rhetoric of Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 22(5), 477–493.

Elmali, B. (n.d.). From Past to Present: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. TRT World Research Centre. Retrieved from: https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/InfoPack__Israel_Palestinian_Conflict-v4.pdf. Accessed 23 October 2025.

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. New York: Longman Publishing.

Fairhurst, G. T. (2011). Leadership and the power of framing. *Leader to Leader*, 2011(61), 43–47.

Full text of Abu Obeida's speech regarding recent developments in Gaza (2023, October 30). Nournews. Retrieved from <https://nournews.ir/en/news/154308/Full-text-of-Abu-Obeida's-speech-regarding-recent-developments-in-Gaza>. Accessed 3 December 2025.

Gomaa, A. Y. (2023). Decoding the Language of Politics: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Ukrainian President Zelensky's Speeches during the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict. *Journal of Literary Studies and Humanities*, 28(3), 1–43.

Hasan, A. M. (2025). The Role of Discourse Analysis in Justifying Military Action: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Russian and Ukrainian Official Statements. *The Creative Launcher*, 10(4), 92–100.

Janssen, F. (2009). Hamas and its Positions Towards Israel Understanding the Islamic Resistance Organization through the concept of framing. *Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael*. Retrieved from https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20090200_cscp_security_paper_jansen.pdf. Accessed 24 October 2025.

Johansson, C. (2015). Empowering employees through communicative leadership. In Melo, D. A. et al. (eds.), *Organizational and Strategic Communication Research: European Perspectives II*. CECS – Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade Universidade do Minho Braga, Portugal.

Klein, M. (2024). Hamas's Narrative of 7 October and the Impossibility of Ignoring It. *IAI Commentaries* 24/05. Retrieved from <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/hamass-narrative-7-october-and-impossibility-ignoring-it>. Accessed 23 October 2025.

Lehman, I. M. (2024). *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations: A Critique of Texts* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Lehman, I. M. & Grint, K. (2024). Leadership as a relational and discursive process: Exploring rhetorical and material dynamics. *Discourses on Culture*, 22(2), 7–12.

Mankoff, J. (2022). Russia's war in Ukraine: Identity, history, and conflict. The Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-war-ukraine-identity-history-and-conflict>. Accessed 10 October 2025.

Minawi, R. M. (2024). Analyzing the Rhetoric of the Aqsa Flood War (2023–2024): A Study of Hamas' Official Discourse through Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 191–198.

Netanyahu, B. (2023, October 7). Statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: “We are at war, not in an operation or in rounds, but at war”. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-7-oct-2023>. Accessed 3 December 2025.

Netanyahu, B. (2024, September 27). Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: Remarks at the 79th session of the UN General Assembly. United Nations–The Question of Palestine. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/israel-pm-remarks-un-ga-79-27sep24/>. Accessed 3 December 2025.

Oddo, J. (2011). War legitimization discourse: Representing 'Us' and 'Them' in four US presidential addresses. *Discourse & Society*, 22(3), 287–314.

Our Narrative... Operation Al-Aqsa Flood (n.d.) Hamas media Office. Retrieved from <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/PDF.pdf>. Accessed 3 December 2025.

Roulet, T., & Pitchler, R. (2020). Blame Game Theory: Scapegoating, Whistleblowing and Discursive Struggles following Accusations of Organizational Misconduct. *Organization Theory*, 1(4), 1–30.

Serafimovska, E., Gruevska Madjoska, S., Taipi, V., Shemko-Georgievska, J., Temenugova, A., Karanfilovska, M., Trajkoska, Z., Trajkoska, J., & Konesha-Vasilevska, T. (2024). *The Narrative Trap: Exposing Harmful Narratives used by Politicians and Media*. Skopje: Institute of Communication Studies.

Shalev, A. R. (2025). Hamas' October 7th Genocide: Legal Analysis and the Weaponisation of Reverse Accusations—A Study in Modern Genocide Recognition and Denial. *Israel Law Review*. Published online 2025, 1–40.

Shenhav, R. S. (2006). Political Narratives and Political Reality. *International Political Science Review*, 27(3), 245–262.

Soukni, A. (2025). *The Power of Political Speeches and Linguistic Strategies A qualitative critical discourse analysis on Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to the 2024 United Nations General Assembly*. Master's Thesis in Religion in Peace and Conflict. Department of Theology. Uppsala University.

Sveningsson, S., & Alvesson, M. (2004). Managing Managerial Identities Organizational Fragmentation, Discourse and Identity Struggle. *Human Relations*, 56(2003/1).

van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society*, 17(3), 359–383.

van Hulst, M., Metze, T., Dewulf, A., de Vries, J., van Bommel, S., & van Ostaïjen, M. (2025). Discourse, framing and narrative: three ways of doing critical, interpretive policy analysis. *Critical Policy Studies*, 19(1), 74–96.

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0017

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Jorge Leal da Silva

Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Sao Paulo School of Business Administration, Brazil

jorge.hanai@fgv.edu.br

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0982-1924

Adolfo Garcé

Department of Political Science, Universidad de la República Uruguay, Montevideo, Uruguay

adolfo.garce@cienciassociales.edu.uy

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7941-0197

Beyond the Buzzwords: Why Ideas and Discourse Matter in Management

Article history:**Received** 24 August 2025**Revised** 27 November 2025**Accepted** 28 November 2025**Available online** 16 December 2025

Abstract: The social sciences have seen significant changes over the past three decades, with a return of ideas and discourses as crucial factors in management and organisational studies. This article examines the critical frameworks and analytical strategies for studying language and power that have been applied to the management field. We approach this by revisiting the literature on public administration, the domain where discourse first emerged as a key variable in the social sciences. Our contribution is an extensive review of the international literature to quantitatively and qualitatively assess academic output in this area. Based on the “argumentative turn”, we argue for three socially mediated dimensions—logistic, ideational, and material—that act as an interdisciplinary link with linguistics. We argue that discursive approaches are essential to management because they anchor the field in constructivism, thereby highlighting the power of ideas in the analysis of institutional dynamics.

Keywords: organizational studies, critical discourse analysis, critical discourse studies, discourse, argumentative turn

Introduction

Keywords like “power” (used by scholars such as Norman Fairclough and Teun Van Dijk) and “social capital” (from Pierre Bourdieu) often seem outdated and fail to fully explain the dynamic processes within management discourses. This limitation is what motivated us, as discourse analysts, to write this article. Our first argument is that a superficial reading of postmodern discourses in

management has been like searching for the “philosopher’s stone”—a single solution to complex empirical problems (Schmidt, 2008; Lee & Romano, 2013).

Nevertheless, the proliferation of scholarship from major figures such as Fairclough, Foucault, Habermas, and Fischer has, since the 1990s, established new theoretical and methodological frameworks (Xiao & Li, 2021). These new approaches are highly suitable for analyzing public policies (Boullosa et al., 2021) and the administrative management (Lehman & Gould, 2022) inherent to the internal control of modern organizations.

In organizational studies, the variable “discourse” gains relevance in the face of different possible research clippings supported by creative recursive-conceptual abstractions originating from the so-called argumentative turn in management academia. This scholarly framework has effectively supported powerful means of interpreting the material social (Fairclough, 2013), historical, political, and economic (Bevir & Rhodes 2003; Jun, 2006; Rhodes, 2019) dimensions inherent in daily organizational management (Trein et al., 2019).

The imperative that appears irreversible in management academia is the accession of organized knowledge about what is understood as discourse from the postulates of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), both of which tend to be applied to the analysis of politics associated with management (Dunlop & Radelli, 2020; Fairclough, 2013; Xiao & Li, 2021). Consequently, we posit that discourse is fundamental to integration and coordination (Trein et al., 2019), as well as to organizational learning in the policy cycle (Dunlop & Radelli, 2020). It also frames strategies to prevent policy reform (Vis, 2016) from being employed simply as a performative sign of rapid action against the manifold challenges inherent in public management. In short, once incorporated as a categorical variable in organizational research, discourses invariably emerge under the organizational convention of their addenda in the aforementioned CDA and CDS. In spite of the clarity and distinctiveness of the English criticality of the French post-structuralist tradition, the truth is that we do not know, qualitatively speaking, how the use of this important variable has generated innovative explanatory insights in the applied social sciences, nor in which directions the underlying theoretical-empirical elaborations and confrontations are ontologically situated in management. After all, is there

a theoretical element common to critical discourse analysis in management that allows us to clarify in which directions academic production is heading? We are convinced and have been encouraged to conduct the research by the fact that there are no robust qualitative or quantitative analyses published in this sense.

The strengthening of these critical methodologies within applied social sciences, and management in particular, opens new avenues for analysis. They provide a level of innovation that alternative theoretical models have not consistently achieved (Schmidt, 2008). We therefore support Xiao and Li's (2021) call to organize the literature on qualitative discourse analysis in management, particularly given the manifold ramifications of interpretivism and constructivism in the social sciences. We seek to fill this void by synthesizing the field's output. Our analysis focuses on the concepts and strategies inherited from critical discourse traditions and their application to management.

We reinforce the coherence of situating our research in a journal of critical tradition in light of the historical silencing projected by the administrative sciences to ways of managing other than those drawn from the experiences of business organizations in the global North. We advance the field of critical discursive inquiry by adopting a systematic review methodology. Unlike prior studies (Rogers & Schaenen, 2014; Qian et al., 2018; Tian, 2019; Miao & Zhao, 2019; Xin, 2020), our approach evaluates the academic literature through both quantitative and qualitative lenses. We recognize the importance of the quantitative attributes required in a review. Mindful of the warning that quantitative metrics are often 'abstract and approximate representations of reality' which fail to capture 'actual work and the number of hours spent on tasks' (Boncorim et al., 2020, p. 59), we expand our analysis. We therefore focus on qualitative variables based on defined social categories. Our article innovates by combining a supra-qualitative approach with the quantitative assumptions of the 'Methodi Ordinatio' (a nomenclature for the creators of the method). This combination helps reduce the bias in defining 'most relevant articles' (Pagani et al., 2017). The quantitative variables we observed were the number of citations, publication year, and journal impact factor—a triangulation that was missing in Xiao and Li's (2021) study, which we aim to overcome here. We also identify the predominantly US and Eurocentric management epistemologies as

the starting point for epistemological work on public organizations, which we will henceforth refer to as Public Administration. Our main interest is understanding the transportation of the concept 'discourse' between different knowledge areas (like Linguistics).

Building blocks: the interplay of cognitive frames and discourse within policy analysis and public administration

The landscape of social science has evolved substantially over the last three decades. In essence, diverse intellectual paths have led to a resurgence of cognitive frames and discourses as pivotal drivers of political action. The escalating interest in critical approaches to discourse serves as a clear manifestation of this paradigmatic shift.

On one hand, the social sciences have witnessed an 'ideational turn' since at least the late 1990s. While Plato's critiques of poets and his guidance on educating philosophers demonstrate that reflection on the political power of ideas is as old as political theory itself, this tradition was marginalized during the late 20th century. The dominance of positivism and theories centered on the 'objective interests' of actors left little room for such inquiry. However, beginning in the 1990s, the re-emergence of ideas and cognitive frames (Blyth, 1997; Gofas & Hay, 2009; Béland & Cox, 2011) became increasingly visible across diverse fields, including Political Economy (Hall, 1989; Blyth, 2003; Mukand & Rodrik, 2018), International Relations (Sikkink, 1991; Goldstein & Keohane, 1993), and Public Policy (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Béland, 2019; Swinkels, 2020). For proponents of this 'ideational turn', ideas are the primary drivers of change in policy and institutions, while discourses are viewed merely as vehicles for transmitting these ideas (Schmidt, 2008). Consequently, this perspective tends to overshadow, or effectively remove, the sociological dimension of discourse.

Running parallel to the interest in cognitive frames, but acknowledging different roots, a 'linguistic turn' also unfolded (Gibbons, 1987; Fairclough, 1995; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006; Bevir & Blakely, 2018). This movement has a distinct nature: it stems from the philosophy of language rather than the positivist tradition.

Propelled by postmodern critiques of structuralism—and heavily influenced by Michel Foucault—this approach shifts the goal of inquiry from explanation to interpretation, dissolving the rigid separation between researcher and object. This turn is evident in International Relations (Epstein, 2008), Political Economy (Fairclough, 2000), and Public Policy (Durnova et al., 2013). Critical approaches to discourse are an integral part of this lineage. Because they emphasize power asymmetries and domination, however, these frameworks are often better equipped to explain the persistence of the status quo rather than the mechanics of change.

Historically, the ideational and linguistic traditions developed in isolation owing to their differing theoretical roots. Yet, the resurgence of cognitive frames has facilitated the acceptance of research into the political agency of discourse. While differing in ontology and epistemology, both perspectives concur that cognitive frames account for both the transformation and the stagnation of institutions. They also hold that discourse, while transformative, is inextricably linked to the situated practices that surround it.

Public Administration has largely failed to integrate the insights generated by this tacit coalition. Just as cognitive frames and discourse were regaining influence, the welfare state crisis shifted the state-market equilibrium, prompting renewed focus on state logic. The New Public Management reforms of the 1990s (Hood, 1991; Vining & Weimer, 2005), which produced varied outcomes globally (Ferlie, 2017), offered a critical opportunity for examination through discursive lenses (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003; Jun, 2006; Rhodes, 2019)—an opportunity the field has yet to fully exploit.

Methodology and approach

Consistent with our introductory remarks, our review process did not overlook quantitative metrics. Instead, we utilized the *Methodi Ordinatio* (Pagani et al., 2017) to prioritize scientific publications based on their relevance to the field. This instrument generates a hierarchy of works by synthesizing three variables: number of citations, impact factor, and recency of publication. The protocol unfolded across nine main stages:

Stage 1: Scope Definition. We sought to map the scholarship and methodologies associated with critical discursive inquiry in the field of Public Administration (PA).

Stage 2: Preliminary Search. We conducted a preliminary search in the Web of Science (WoS) database.

Stage 3: Keyword Definition. We defined the search terms as “TS = (Critical Discourse Analysis)” and “TS = (Critical Discourse Studies*).” (“TS” captures articles that cite these terms in their content).

Stage 4: Execution of the Search Protocol. The final data collection was performed on October 19, 2021, encompassing the entire historical range of the database (1945–2021). To ensure disciplinary relevance, results were filtered by the Web of Science category “Public Administration”. The search utilized the following specific parameters and indexes (SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, A&HCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH, ESCI):

- Query 1: TS = (Critical Discourse Analysis*)
- Query 2: TS = (Critical Discourse Studies*)

Stage 5: Data Cleaning and Filtering.

- We imported the data in WoS “Bib” format using JabRef to exclude duplicate records.
- We then manually screened the titles, keywords, and abstracts, discarding 17 studies that were not relevant to the research.

Stage 6: Data Organization and Tool Use.

- The remaining data was organized in an Excel spreadsheet. We used the JCR 2020 calculation for the Impact Factor (F), and the WoS information (managed by SciMAT software) for the publication year and citation count (Ci).
- The complementary use of SciMAT was crucial as it listed 7,622 raw observations of references, preventing reference loss (e.g.,

VOSViewer showed only 21 citations for Foucault, while SciMAT correctly showed 34).

Stage 7: Calculating Relevance. The relevance of each study was calculated using the Methodi Ordinatio equation (1):

$$\text{InOrdinatio} = (Fi / 1000) + (\alpha * (10 - (\text{research year} - \text{publication year}))) + (Ci) \text{ (eq.1)}$$

Fi is the impact factor, and Ci is the number of citations. α is a weight defined by the researcher for the timeliness of the article (ranging from 1 to 10). We assigned $\alpha = 6$, indicating that the publication year had moderate importance for the research relevance in CDS and CDA.

Stage 8: Full-Text Retrieval. We located and collected the full texts for all articles included in the final research corpus.

Stage 9: In-Depth Analysis. The most relevant articles (Table 1), identified by the “InOrdinatio” ranking, were read and analyzed in depth.

Table 1. Most relevant articles according to InOrdinatio calculation

Full Title	Author	Journal	F * _	A p **	C e ***	IO****
Taking power to the sea: Towards a post-structuralist discourse theoretical critique of marine spatial planning	Ralph Tafon	Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	2.655	2018	38	80
Regulating higher education: quality assurance and neoliberal managerialism in higher education—A critical introduction	Darryl Jarvis	Politics and Society	1.181	2014	59	77
Deconstructing the debate over evidence-based policy	Joshua Newman	Critical political studies	0.566	2017	31	67
The urban resource nexus: on the politics of relationality, water–energy infrastructure, and the fallacy of integration	Joe Williams, Stefan Bouzarovski and Erik Swyngedouw	Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	2.655	2019	12	60
Bringing critical institutionalism and fragmented authoritarianism in China: an analysis of centralized water policies and their local implementation in semi-arid irrigation districts	Raymond Yu Wang, Tao Liu and Heping Dan	Regulation and Governance	1.417	2018	18	60
Discursive agency: (Re-)conceptualizing actors and practices in the analysis of discursive policymaking	Sina Leipold and Georg Winkel	Policy Studies Journal	1.773	2017	22	58
A framework for analyzing and practicing integrative governance: The case of global animal and conservation governance	Ingrid Visseren-Hamakers	Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	2.655	2018	12	54

.....

.....

Full Title	Author	Journal	F * _	A p **	C e ***	IO****
Wellbeing and welfare: a psychosocial analysis of being well and doing well enough	David Taylor	Social Policy Journal	1,425	2011	54	54
Toponymic assemblages, resistance and the politics of planning in Vancouver, Canada	Trevor Wideman and Jeffrey Masuda	Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	2,655	2018	11	53
Is 'Candidacy' a useful concept for understanding journeys through public services? A Critical Synthesis of the Interpretive Literature	Mhairi Mackenzie, Ellie Conway, Annette Hastings, Moira Munro, Catherine and O'Donnell	Social Policy and Administration	0,972	2013	40	52
Use of social media platforms by public administrators: overcoming the legitimacy dilemma?	Claire Connolly Knox	Administration e Society	0,982	2016	20	50
Puzzling and powering in policy paradigm shifts: Politicization, depoliticization and social learning	Matthew Wood	Critical political studies	0,566	2015	26	50

Impact factor; **Year of publication; ***Citations; **** InOrdinatio.
Source: Developed by the Authors.

The final rating for the selection of the most relevant articles was 50 or higher (numerical cutoff called “InOrdinatio”). This criterion was essential for our selection of which articles we should analyze in depth. For this reason, we divided our corpus into two groups: Group 1 (154 observed articles): considering the reading of the title, abstract and keywords and theoretical-conceptual orientation; and Group 2 (12 observed articles): considering the in-depth analysis of the most relevant articles (Table 1).

Analyzing the data from groups 1 and 2 of the research corpus

Our analysis delineated a corpus of 166 articles predicated on epistemologies and problematics characteristic of the Global North. These works mobilize analytical strategies—situated within US and Eurocentric traditions—that traverse the theoretical spectrum from Michel Foucault’s post-structuralism (deploying concepts of governmentality, orders of discourse, and discursive formations) to ideational frameworks such as Schmidt’s (2008) Discursive Institutionalism, which elucidates international relations through the lens of institutional and economic dynamics.

While Leipold and Winkel (2017, p. 512) have previously established Foucault’s ubiquity as a ‘basic reference in discourse studies’, we seek to refine this understanding. We demonstrate that, within the empirical and applied realm of management, the Foucauldian archaeological method functions not merely to trace the constitutive processes of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, but also to decipher the institutional order—often conceptualized as the ‘institutional environment’ (Lee & Romano, 2013)—in which actors operate. In aggregate, the reviewed scholarship interrogates public governance, applying critical theoretical lenses to the discursive content generated by technical, political, and stakeholder actors throughout the trajectory of public policy formulation, implementation, and discontinuity.

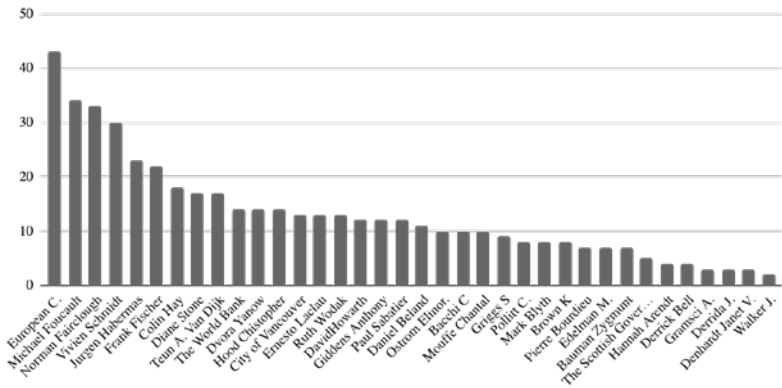
Put differently, these guidelines correspond to a policy landscape defined by deontic (normative) and epistemic (knowledge-based) constraints. This environment demands the coproduction of policies based on evidence with robust socio-ideational and socio-material legitimacy. Only through

such legitimacy become policies ready to ‘operate’, a term we define as the mobilization of discursively coordinated action, often through networks, to achieve material effects. This definition aligns with the trajectory of socio-material change outlined by Fairclough (1993).

Discursive practices exert tangible effects on the material sphere, most notably through the rationalization of resource distribution and the lexical stratification of policies into ‘strategic’ versus secondary categories. This critical orientation serves as the connective tissue of the reviewed corpus. Specifically, we observe that these studies share a focus on the interplay of the logistical, ideational, and material dimensions of discourse in shaping public policy. We dedicate the following paragraphs to exemplifying how these social dimensions underpin policy legitimacy. However, a prerequisite to this discussion is an examination of the meta-analysis, which establishes the ontology of the field’s scholarly output.

Our meta-analysis via SciMAT (Figure 2) positions the European Commission (EC), OECD, IMF, and World Bank (WB) as primary discursive anchors for critical policy analysis. As loci of high-level deliberation, these institutions provide the essential documentary evidence required to trace argumentative dynamics—both convergent and divergent—across multiple sectors. In doing so, they illuminate the complex interplay of agency and the discursive interfaces linking the political sphere, the technical apparatus of bureaucracy, and the realm of scientific research.

Figure 1. Major sources and seminal authors on CDS and CDA



Source: Developed by the Authors.

Our reference to the European Commission (EC) does not postulate a strict comparative homogeneity across the reviewed case studies. Rather, the prevailing scholarly focus lies in interrogating the ‘impact’ of discourses circulating in the supranational arena and analyzing their subsequent translation and reverberations within domestic policy environments. This is exemplified by the regulatory perspective of the World Bank (WB) versus the recommendatory tone of the EC. In most studies reviewed, researchers sometimes observe how the structures and knowledge bases of public bodies are transformed and, at other times, expose deficiencies and semantic conflicts within discourse communities or coalitions.

It is indisputable that the genealogy of cognitive frames and discourses is central to the public sphere, a fact that substantially reinforces the validity of constructivism within the applied social sciences. Throughout this analysis, we aim to demonstrate that this centrality is equally critical for decoding the institutional matrices in which these discourses are inscribed.

Our analysis reveals two axes central to critical studies in this domain: (i) governance conflicts and (ii) semantic struggles that disrupt the functioning of sectoral public policies. These disruptions challenge the State’s fundamental role in safeguarding social rights and stability. It is worth emphasizing that the volatility of public policies is not merely a symptom of government performance. Rather, it reflects the contingent character of the discursive arena, where competing definitions and systems of knowledge vie for dominance in policy design and execution. Our data suggests a balanced distribution of research along these two axes. While 41 of the 166 articles deal directly with governance, the others address it through the analysis of semantic tensions, cooperation strategies, or specific policy sectors.

We identify a consistent theme guiding this scholarship: the effort to position ideas and discourses at the center of political analysis, unveiling their potential to unsettle the social order. This research often reveals that the discursive construction of reality is contingent, driven by opportunity and context—a phenomenon Vincent and O’Mahoney (2018) refer to as the ‘transitive character’ of ideational carriers. To further qualify these findings, we selected the twelve most significant articles based on the InOrdinatio calculation for detailed review.

Tafon (2018) examines marine spatial planning by incorporating the concept of social life, arguing that the oceans must be understood as lived social spaces. The definition of rules and management styles in this sphere is influenced by the ideational power inherent in the act of planning. This administrative logic aligns with the principles long emphasized by W. E. Deming: that ultimately, valid planning requires forecasts minimally grounded in the objective rigor of mathematical and statistical laws.

Within this monolithic and restrictive epistemic framework, semantic hegemony is carefully curated to render specific planning models intelligible and persuasive, while marginalizing others. Consequently, alternative paradigms are displaced by a form of cognitive imperialism. Tafon (2018) observes that textual markers such as ‘integrate’ and ‘balance’ are mobilized to steer sense-making along this hegemonic path.

We recognize that this imperialism of organizational knowledge is a foundational concern within critical discursive scholarship. It directly reflects the nexus of knowledge and power elucidated by Michel Foucault (2012). Although Foucault did not explicitly address public policy, his relational ontology and analytical framework remain indispensable to the Public Administration literature analyzed here—precisely because they illuminate the selective and exclusionary nature of meaning production.

Tafon (2018) shows that the discourse of planning is interdiscursively woven into the matrices of sustainable development. This fusion allows planners to manage opposing voices without silencing them, integrating them into carefully controlled participatory processes. Based on Lee and Romano (2013), we conclude that while subjects are not passive—they engage and speak—they remain powerless in the face of these organizational institutions. Although they participate and are heard for pragmatic purposes, the institutional logic prevents this participation from translating into substantive control.

Wideman and Masuda (2018) expand upon the idea of imperial planning as a site of dispute among the guardians of spatial management expertise. Echoing Tafon’s (2018) critique of how specific cognitions and forecasting techniques are privileged, they apply this framework to Canadian urban planning. They emphasize that economic power acts as the central ideological force shaping

the built environment. The study convinces the reader that the holders of economic capital are the ultimate arbiters of how planning is organized, executed, and controlled.

However, this process is not without friction. The multiplicity of discourses and materialities involved creates a non-linear dynamic full of 'noise'. Wideman and Masuda (2018) describe a complex environment where dominant planning discourses can trigger unintended consequences, such as stimulating anti-gentrification movements. We classify this as a 'critical incident effect', which forces organizations to expend effort managing dissent.

Moving forward, Jarvis (2014) applies a similar lens to higher education, revealing the imposition of quasi-market rationalities through parliamentary discourse—a trend also noted by Taylor (2011). Key to this analysis is the finding that ideational coercion, softened by political rhetoric, instills a predatory logic within policy performance assessments. This research is essential for understanding how discursive ontologies translate into concrete outcomes within the legal and legislative systems.

In a different vein, Newman (2017) cautions against dismissing policy arguments as merely 'convenient' or logically dubious. He posits that, contrary to common belief, the arguments on both sides of the evidence-based policy debate are intelligible and compatible. Thus, we must distinguish between healthy disagreement and actual inconsistency. Such inconsistencies should be treated as intellectual puzzles that require resolution—ideally through civil deliberation, but also through systematic research. Clarifying these distinctions via rigorous study remains a primary responsibility for discourse analysts in public administration.

Newman (2017) adds a second caveat: policy discourses are 'messy, non-linear dialogues'. As a result, the notion of a structured 'public debate' is often a misnomer, as the chaotic nature of interaction prevents stakeholders from engaging in substantive dialogue. Even institutional actors may face uncertainty regarding their role in these public forums.

The networked actors approach seeks to bring order to this 'empirical mess' through systematic academic analysis. The complexity of mapping these discursive spaces—fraught with political and socioeconomic conflict—leads

Wang, Liu and Dang (2018) to conclude that these disputes extend beyond the classic Principal-Agent model. They observe that emerging groups act as 'staff agents', playing a gatekeeping role in maintaining the boundaries of the tellable and the institutionally acceptable.

The divide between agency and staff is not rigid; it is a tense and fluid boundary that, when breached, creates discursive cracks and fuels conflict between opposing groups. Wang, Liu, and Dang (2018) illustrate this within water law institutions, demonstrating how these emergent tensions are critical for understanding political discourse in water governance.

For readers seeking to expand their understanding of agency theory, Leipold and Winkel (2017) offer a vital complement to Wang et al. (2018). They propose the concept of trialectic agency, a model within the discursive agency approach that integrates the individual, the structure, and the researcher's interpretation. This perspective enriches the approach taken by Visseren-Hamakers (2018), who is also concerned with how actors use discourse to gain political standing.

Adopting a rigorous theoretical stance, Visseren-Hamakers (2018, p. 18) presents an analytical framework predicated on the axiom that 'discourses, practices, and structures mostly do not change overnight'. This perspective emphasizes the converse: that the maintenance of these elements is inscribed within the everyday material processes of institutions. Consequently, analyzing governance systems and actor relationships necessitates coherent methodological delineations capable of capturing this stability.

In a related empirical application, Mackenzie et al. (2013) investigate the utilization of public health services by the wealthy. They conclude that the ethical dilemmas surrounding state resource allocation to those with the least need cannot be resolved through the lens of 'candidacy'—a concept referring to the negotiation of eligibility for specific public services, typically analyzed in conjunction with equity. The study suggests that while candidacy explains *access*, it fails to resolve the moral question of allocation.

The role of discourse is central to rationalizing this ethical tension, validating the affluent as legitimate users of the public health infrastructure. By invoking the principle of collectivity, these discourses posit that the wealthy are not external to the societal body. Thus, economic privilege does not constitute

an impediment to state provision; instead, resource allocation is defended via abstract, generic principles of citizenship.

Addressing the dilemma that risks inducing administrative paralysis, Mackenzie et al. (2013) revisit the dialectic between the Lifeworld and the System. In an ideal configuration, the System's rules prioritize the collective interest, directing managerial logic toward human welfare. The Lifeworld, representing the realm of individual needs, seeks integration into the System. The functioning of both worlds is mediated by the social contract and solidarity, which serve as the regulatory mechanisms for organizing material distribution.

Knox (2016) investigates the nexus between the System and the Lifeworld, arguing that the quest for administrative collaboration with citizens is now anchored in social media. In this model, the Lifeworld is read as the communicative interaction occurring in cyberspace, supported by the System's instrumental infrastructure of professionalized management.

Applying Habermasian Communicative Action Theory, Knox seeks to understand how digital platforms can function as tools of communicative rationality, thereby legitimizing participation. This approach challenges the traditional politics-administration dichotomy. Yet, the friction between the public and their elected representatives remains a critical gap; Knox implicitly critiques the quality of deliberation in an era of political disaffection.

Wood (2015) advances this critique by exploring institutional change via rhetorical argumentation, pinpointing deliberative quality as the source of 'noise' in democratic systems. His theoretical inquiry engages with depoliticization and the capacity of discourse to act upon reality. Responding to skepticism regarding the material agency of ideas, Wood aligns with Schmidt's (2008, 2012) constructivist institutionalism. He illustrates that the achievement of communicative rationality is fundamentally a discursive operation, capable of reshaping the material social order.

In light of the analysis performed thus far, Table 2 synthesizes the primary social dimensions characterizing critical approaches to discourse in management. We emphasize that this taxonomy is not intended to create hermetic silos of knowledge. Instead, we propose a flexible organization, using the principle of intersectionality as the connective logic to navigate these dimensions.

Table 2. Social dimensions of the CDA and CDS applied in Management

Social dimensions	Overview
Logistics	The social dimension aggregates discourses of varying natures, spanning from deontic rules to epistemic truths. It functions as a logistic mechanism—an efficient transport system for ideas and arguments—capable of converting discursive intent into concrete material effects.
Ideational	Social dimension that captures discourses of different natures and modalities without necessarily identifying the transition from deontic to epistemic. It is only ideational because there is no degree of efficiency in its transport of ideas “mind to mind” in the cognitions of others.
Material	This social dimension offers a distinct innovation for analyzing how discourse exerts material domination. The framework clearly identifies the underlying objectives of these discourses. Moreover, it serves as a form of ‘effectiveness control’, evaluating the correspondence between discursive intent and actual execution.

Source: Developed by the Authors.

As detailed in Table 2 (Social dimensions of the CDA and CDS applied in Management), the ‘socially mediated’ aspect constitutes the vector through which ideas and discourses permeate society. This aligns with Schmidt’s (2008) notion of ‘transport’, where the metaphysical orders the material. The value of Table 2 lies in its Foucauldian grounding: it recognizes that power has a non-repressive, productive character.

Consequently, the table demonstrates that logistical transport alone is inadequate. To achieve the objectives outlined in our framework, one must diagnose the environment to exercise a power that compels broad-based adherence. As Foucault (2012, pp. 44–45) argues, power ‘permeates, produces things... [and] forms knowledge’. It is this foundational realization that allows Table 2 to serve as a diagnostic tool for analyzing the ‘power of discourses’, correlating their social permeability with their strategic intent.

Consequently, the classification of dimensions presented in Table 2 was empirically derived from the research corpus. We acknowledge, however, that the 166 articles in our sample transcend these categories, particularly given that

critical discursive scholarship is characterized by profound specificity regarding underlying macro- and micro-sociological dynamics. To address this complexity and ensure transparency, we have organized supplementary datasets, which will be deposited in the Harvard Dataverse repository in due course.

Ideas and discourses matter in management

By examining the many sub-topics and specific case studies within governance and sectoral public policy, we disagree that the influence of discourses on socio-material reality is inexplicable or causally imprecise. Instead, our findings show various explanations for the social and political dynamics involved in conflicts between different actors (agency conflicts) and the dependence on specific contexts (context contingency). These dynamics illuminate the varying configurations of domination and the concrete enactment of power relations.

We reject the premise that political inquiry must be exclusively tethered to the positivist scientific methods found in specialized literature. Although frameworks prioritizing structured execution and decision-making hold significant sway, the ascendancy of the 'linguistic turn' has re-centered ideas and discourses as critical variables. This discursive perspective functions as a vital analytical counterweight, enriching the insights provided by positivist approaches

From a critical-discursive standpoint, management scholarship can better interrogate the role of language—both in its continuous flows and its ruptures—during disputes between political and administrative bodies. By positing political processes as synonymous with argumentative processes, we apply this perspective to policy analysis. Specifically, we employ Norman Fairclough's framework of discursive commodification, tracing the trajectory of policy discourse through its critical stages: production, distribution, and consumption.

Our analysis suggests that these linguistic-discursive mechanisms extend beyond the political sphere to encompass the bureaucratic interface with citizens (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979) and stakeholders (Boje et al., 2021). This points to the emergence of a macro-theory of argumentation, borrowing

its epistemological tools from the critical linguistic tradition rather than management proper.

While often centered on the pragmatics of functional language, this framework provides a robust basis for theorizing—and generalizing—political and administrative disputes. By recognizing that ‘argument is central to all stages of the political process’ (Majone, 1989), we facilitate a deeper understanding of discursive construction. Accordingly, we delineate four distinct rationales for this centrality:

- Identification: argumentation is the primary tool used to recognize and define issues as public or organizational problems.
- Urgency: communicational discourse is the mechanism that reveals the severity and public nature of these problems.
- Mobilization: the sharing of meanings creates a sense of alarm and highlights the collective responsibility to solve these conflicts.
- Evaluation: analyzing the logic of arguments establishes the objective criteria necessary to evaluate public problems (Stone, 2002).

Future Directions and Concluding Reflections

We consider it particularly important to clarify that our article does not aim to reinforce a rigid structure of knowledge based on the social constructivist approach. Although we are clear about the subjectivity in how discourses are structured, our purpose was to organize the discussion beyond simply understanding the state-of-the-art literature. We thus seek to reaffirm social construction assumptions using innovative and recent approaches by highlighting the rising prominence of the ‘discourse’ variable.

We recognize that including discourse as an explanatory variable is not a novelty *per se* in the literature. However, the growing use of this variable highlights the limitations of positivism, without declaring its nullity or endorsing the “all-or-nothing” dichotomy that more extreme research insists on promoting. Our intention is not to advocate for the complete reconciliation of approaches, but rather to identify trends that our study revealed and which, in our assessment,

remain solid even after scientific revolutions and paradigm shifts. Therefore, we state our contribution to a constructivism in Administration that values and reinforces the use of the concepts and analysis strategies presented throughout this study.

We move forward by proposing four key assumptions to explain why the concept of discursive commodification in management is central. Our approach is propositive, not merely descriptive, as we organize the existing academic production into specific dimensions (Table 2). We acknowledge that prominent scholars like Fairclough, Van Dijk, Van Leeuwen, and Wodak were key figures in critical discourse studies between 2011 and 2020, as highlighted by Xiao and Li (2021, p. 492). Our research builds upon this by explaining *why* this group is so central. Specifically, we found that studies citing Fairclough's (1993) work, *Discourse and Social Change*, often integrated his concept of intervention in social reality (or social change) alongside discursive commodification. We argue that these two concepts are strongly linked to the socio-material dimension because they work together to drive specific, non-generic social change.

We agree that social change, as manifested in these discourses, often contests the material resources that perpetuate social injustice. It does so by questioning the unequal and arbitrary use of such resources, thereby challenging the ideological foundations (ideas) that sustain the status quo. When applied to policy analysis, this means that research uses ideas (Schmidt, 2008) and discourses (Tafon, 2018; Jarvis, 2014; Leipold & Winkel, 2017; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Newman, 2017; Taylor, 2011; Wang et al., 2018; Knox, 2016; Wideman & Masuda, 2018; Wood, 2015; Visseren-Hamakers, 2018) to address a public problem by recognizing and balancing both the material world and the ideational world (ideas/concepts). We term this process the ideational social dimension that characterizes this body of scholarship. Finally, our study has two main limitations: we relied solely on one international database, and we focused only on scientific articles, excluding books, book chapters, and technical reports. While we attempted to mitigate the second limitation through a meta-analysis of references, future research could conduct an exhaustive survey dedicated specifically to analyzing these non-article types of academic publications.

References

Béland, D. (2019). *How ideas and institutions shape public policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Béland, D., & Cox, R. H. (Eds.) (2011). *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*. Oxford University Press.

Bevir, M., & Blahely, J. (2018). *Interpretive social science: An anti-naturalist approach*. Oxford University Press.

Bevir, M., & Rhodes, R. A. W. (2003). *Interpreting British governance*. Routledge.

Boje, D., Pelly, R. D. M., Saylor, R., Saylor, J., & Trafimow, S. (2021). Implications of Tamara-Land Consciousness Discourses for Organization Culture Studies. *Discourses on Culture*, 16(1), 101–123.

Blyth, M. (1997). Any more bright ideas? The ideational turn of comparative political economy. *Comparative Politics*, 29(2), 229–250.

Blyth, M. (2003). *Great transformations: Economic ideas and institutional change in the twentieth century*. Cambridge University Press.

Boncorim, I., Bizjak, D., & Sicca, M. (2020). Workload allocation models in academia: A panopticon of neoliberal control or tools for resistance? *Tamara: Journal for Critical Organization Inquiry*, 18(1), 51–69.

Boullosa, R. de F., Peres, J. L. P., & Bessa, L. F. M. (2021). Into the field: A reflexive narrative of critical policy studies. *Organizações & Sociedade*, 28(97).

Dunlop, C. A., & Radaelli, C. M. (2020). Policy learning in comparative policy analysis. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, in press.

Durnova, A., Zittoun, P., & Cooper, J. (2013). Discursive approaches to public policy. *Revue française de science politique*, 63, 569–577.

Epstein, C. (2008). *The Power of Words in International Relations: Birth of an Anti-Whaling Discourse*. MIT Press.

Fairclough, N. (1993). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman.

Fairclough, N. (2000). *New labour, new language?* Routledge.

Fairclough, N. (2013). Critical discourse analysis and critical policy studies. *Critical Policy Studies*, 7(2), 177–197.

Ferlie, E. (2017). The new public management and public management studies. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management*. Oxford University Press.

Foucault, M. (2012). *Microphysics of power*. Graal. (Original work published 1975).

Gibbons, M. (1987). *Interpreting politics*. Basil Blackwell.

Gofas, A., & Hay, C. (Eds.) (2009). *The role of ideas in political analysis: A portrait of contemporary debates*. Routledge.

Goldstein, J., & Keohane, R. (1993). *Ideas and foreign policy*. Cornell University Press.

Hall, P. A. (1989). *The political power of economic ideas: Keynesianism through nations*. Princeton University Press.

Hood, C. (1991). A public management for all seasons? *Public Administration*, 69(1), 3–19.

Jarvis, D. S. L. (2014). Regulating higher education: Quality assurance and neoliberal managerialism in higher education—A critical introduction. *Policy and Society*, 33(3), 155–166.

Jun, J. S. (2006). *The social construction of public administration: Interpretive and critical perspectives*. State University of New York.

Kingdon, J. W. (1995). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. Harper Collins College Publishers.

Knox, C. C. (2016). Public administrators' use of social media platforms: Overcoming the legitimacy dilemma? *Administration & Society*, 48(4), 477–496.

Lee, C. W., & Romano, Z. (2013). Democracy's new discipline: Public deliberation as organizational strategy. *Organization Studies*, 34(5–6), 733–753.

Lehman, I. M., & Gould, A. M. (2022). Preface: Power, Control and Domination: Reflections on the Constraining Power of Socio-cultural and Institutional Discourses. *Discourses on Culture*, 17(1), 9–19.

Leipold, S., & Winkel, G. (2017). Discursive agency: (Re-)Conceptualizing actors and practices in the analysis of discursive policymaking. *Policy Studies Journal*, 45(3), 510–534.

Lindblom, C. E., & Cohen, D. K. (1979). *Usable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving*. Yale University Press.

Mackenzie, M., Conway, E., Hastings, A., Munro, M., & O'Donnell, C. (2013). Is 'candidacy' a useful concept for understanding journeys through

public services? A critical synthesis of interpretive literature. *Social Policy & Administration*, 47, 806–825.

Majone, G. (1989). *Evidence, Argument, and Persuasion in the Policy Process*. Yale University Press.

Miao, X. W., & Zhao, Y. (2019). The agenda-setting of CDA and the evolution of research approaches. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, 5, 1–10.

Mukand, S., & Rodrik, D. (2018). *The political economy of ideas: On ideas versus interests in policymaking* (NBER Working Paper No. 24467).

Newman, J. (2017). Deconstructing the debate over evidence-based policy. *Critical Policy Studies*, 11(2), 211–226.

Pagani, R. N., Kovaleski, J. L., & Resende, L. M. M. (2017). Advances in the composition of Methodi Ordinatio for systematic literature review. *Ciência da Informação*, 46(2), 161–187.

Qian, J. W., Wei, J. W., & Law, R. (2018). A review of critical discourse analysis in tourism studies. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 20(4), 526–537.

Rhodes, R. A. W. (2019). Public administration, the interpretive turn and storytelling. In A. Massey (Ed.), *A research agenda for public administration*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Rogers, R., & Schaenen, I. (2014). Critical discourse analysis in literacy: A literature review. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 49(1), 121–143.

Sabatier, P., & Jenkins-Smith, H. C. (Eds.) (1993). *Policy change and learning: An advocacy coalition approach*. Westview Press.

Schmidt, V. (2008). Discursive institutionalism: The explanatory power of ideas and discourse. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11(1), 303–326.

Schmidt, V. (2012). A curious constructivism: A response to Professor Bell. *British Journal of Political Science*, 42(3), 705–713.

Sikkink, K. (1991). *Ideas and institutions: Developmentalism in Brazil and Argentina*. Cornell University Press.

Stone, D. (2002). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making* (3rd ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Swinkels, M. (2020). How ideas matter in public policy: A review of concepts, mechanisms, and methods. *International Review of Public Policy*, 2(3), 281–316.

Tafon, R. V. (2018). Taking power to the sea: Towards a theoretical critique of post-structuralist discourse of marine spatial planning. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 36(2), 258–273.

Taylor, D. (2011). Wellbeing and welfare: A psychosocial analysis of being well and doing well enough. *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(4), 777–794.

Tian, H. L. (2019). The discursive formation of critical discourse analysis in forty years: Implications for the construction of academic discursive systems. *Journal of Tianjin University of Foreign Studies*, 26(1), 1–12.

Trein, P., Meyer, I., & Maggetti, M. (2019). The integration and coordination of public policies: A systematic comparative review. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 21(4), 332–349.

Vincent, S., & Mahoney, J. (2018). Critical realism and qualitative research: An introductory overview. In *Doing research in the social sciences* (pp. 201–216).

Vining, A., & Weimer, D. (2008). Economic perspectives on public organizations. In E. Ferlie, L. E. Lynn, & C. Pollitt (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of public management* (pp. 209–233).

Vis, B. (2016). Taking stock of the comparative literature on the role of blame avoidance strategies in social policy reform. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 18(2), 122–137.

Visseren-Hamakers, I. J. (2018). A framework for analyzing and practicing integrative governance: The case of global animal and conservation governance. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 36(8), 1391–1414.

Wang, R. Y., Liu, T., & Dang, H. (2018). Bridging critical institutionalism and fragmented authoritarianism in China: An analysis of centralized water policies and their local implementation in semi-arid irrigation districts. *Regulation & Governance*, 12(4), 451–465.

Wideman, T. J., & Masuda, J. R. (2018). Toponymic assemblages, resistance and the politics of planning in Vancouver, Canada. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 36(3), 383–402.

Williams, J., Bouzarovski, S., & Swyngedouw, E. (2019). The urban resource nexus: On the politics of relationality, water–energy infrastructure and the fallacy of integration. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 37(4), 652–669.

Wood, M. (2015). Puzzling and powering in policy paradigm shifts: Politicization, depoliticization and social learning. *Critical Policy Studies*, 9(1), 2–21.

Xiao, H., & Li, L. (2021). A bibliometric analysis of critical discourse analysis and its implications. *Discourse & Society*, 32(4), 482–502.

Xin, B. (2020). Critical discourse studies in the 21st century: Reflection and prospects. *Foreign Language Research*, 4, 37–42.

Yanow, D., & Schwartz-Shea, P. (Eds.) (2006). *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*. M.E. Sharpe.

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0018

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Jagat Bahadur Kunwara

School of Business and Economics, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland

jagat.bahadurkunwar@abo.fi

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7612-5841

Discursive Boundary-Making and Contested Legitimacy: A Multicultural Center in Vernacular Publics

Article history:

Received 29 August 2025

Revised 04 November 2025

Accepted 12 November 2025

Available online 16 December 2025

Abstract: This study examines how organizational legitimacy is contested in vernacular publics by focusing on Saaga, a municipally funded multicultural center in Kouvola, Finland. Using the discourse–historical approach (DHA), it analyzes online forum discussions alongside municipal and media texts that offered institutional framings but were largely revoiced and inverted in the vernacular debate. The analysis identifies nine boundary-making logics, grouped into ontological instability, moral economy, and symbolic–material order. Through rhetorical and affective strategies—such as parody, irony, nostalgic comparison, and fiscal misrepresentation—Saaga was recast as being fictive, corrupt, undeserving, or misplaced. Rather than rejecting multiculturalism outright, publics mobilized notions of fairness, efficiency, and common sense to re-signify inclusion as being wasteful or elitist. This study reveals how legitimacy is unraveled in everyday discourse, with ridicule, resentment, and sarcasm operating as tools of delegitimation. It contributes to legitimacy research by foregrounding vernacular publics as agents of discursive boundary-making, to multiculturalism research by showing how civic organizations materialize cultural ideologies and become condensation symbols in public discourse, and to discourse methodology by extending DHA into irony-rich online arenas. It also highlights the symbolic vulnerability of multicultural institutions in the context of demographic decline and political polarization.

Keywords: vernacular publics, organizational legitimacy, multiculturalism, discourse–historical approach, boundary-making

Introduction

Language is a core medium through which cultures, institutions, and organizations are judged and consequently trusted or challenged. Cultural discourses about migration and diversity can therefore shape how a relevant organization's legitimacy is negotiated in civic life by defining its organizational purpose, signaling values, and mediating social position (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995). In organizational studies, legitimacy has been positioned as

a narrative and discursive accomplishment (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Motion & Leitch, 2009), a symbolic performance (Brown, 1994), and a material practice (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2023). Multicultural and multilingual contexts accentuate these dynamics as language moves beyond a mere means of communication to become a forum for constructing and challenging legitimacy and identity (Pettersson & Nortio, 2022).

There is a gap in legitimacy research for the challenges to multicultural organizations in vernacular publics, which in this study are understood as non-elite arenas of everyday discourse where legitimacy is contested outside official or institutional channels. These include online forums, grassroots debates, and informal civic talks (Graham, 2015; Hauser, 1999). While studies have examined how organizations secure external legitimacy through narratives (Golant & Sillince, 2007), discourse strategies (Barros, 2014; Vaara & Tienari, 2008), and category-spanning (Lo Verso, 2025; Zhao et al., 2013), most have focused on institutional and elite arenas. Vernacular publics—such as online forums, comment threads, and community discussions—remain underexplored despite their growing influence. Institutional discourse is not simply echoed through these media but rather reinterpreted, parodied, and inverted to create alternative legitimacy frameworks that directly challenge organizational standing (Symon, 2005; Topal, 2009). Analyzing such spaces could extend legitimacy theory by showing how organizations can be challenged from the “outside-in”.

This study focuses on the legitimacy of a municipally funded multicultural center in Finland, Monikulttuurikeskus Saaga (Saaga) (Monikulttuurikeskus Saaga, 2025), which was established in Kouvola to support migrants' integration through language education, cultural events, and social programming. Beyond its service provision, however, Saaga has become a condensation symbol (Wodak, 2001), having been invoked in public debate to channel anxieties about immigration, civic entitlement, and social cohesion and reframed as being inefficient, elitist, or symbolically excessive (Good, 2009). To analyze these dynamics, this study conceptualizes vernacular contestation as a boundary-making phenomenon (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2008) in which discursive logics classify Saaga as being fictive, corrupt, wasteful, or undeserving (Radoynovska, 2018; Zhao et al., 2013). The discourse-historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak,

2001) was applied to show how rhetorical and affective strategies—such as irony, grotesque metaphors, and ridicule (Ahmed, 2014; Barros, 2014; Pettersson & Nortio, 2022; Symon, 2005)—amplify this delegitimation in vernacular publics. The guiding research question was this: How do rhetorical and affective strategies in vernacular publics mobilize boundary-making logics to contest organizational legitimacy? While institutional texts present Saaga's legitimacy in policy and media discourses, this study focuses primarily on how vernacular publics contest that legitimacy.

This study contributes to multiculturalism research by revealing how diversity is not just debated in abstract policy terms (Kivisto & Wahlbeck, 2013) but also in relation to organizations that become contested civic symbols (Good, 2009; Pettersson & Nortio, 2022). It also extends legitimacy theory by examining vernacular publics and looking at how lay actors exert rhetorical and affective effort to contest organizational legitimacy, thus complementing work on external stakeholder sensemaking (Chen & Kwitonda, 2021; Elsbach, 1994; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Methodologically, it contributes by applying the DHA to vernacular discourse to reveal how evaluative logics, rhetorical tropes, and affective stances converge to regulate organizational legitimacy. These insights have relevance for both researching organizational legitimacy and analyzing cultural discourse in relation to migration, multiculturalism, and civic belonging.

This article proceeds by first reviewing the literature on organizational legitimacy, boundary-making, and discursive strategies for delegitimation. It then outlines the methodology and data corpus before analyzing the nine boundary-making logics, which are grouped into three clusters. The subsequent discussion considers the implications for legitimacy theory, vernacular publics, and multicultural organizations.

Theoretical Framework

Legitimacy and Identity in Multicultural Organizations

Organizational legitimacy refers to socially constructed judgments about appropriateness within broader normative and cultural orders (Suchman, 1995).

Organization studies have analyzed legitimacy as a narrative accomplishment (Golant & Sillince, 2007), a symbolic and political performance (Brown, 1994), or precarious identity work (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). Hybrid entities, such as municipal multicultural centers, are especially vulnerable because they must balance symbolic inclusion against fiscal discipline, bureaucratic accountability, and linguistic expectations (Brickson, 2005; Chen & Kwitonda, 2021; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Elsbach, 1994). This can lead to ontological insecurity (Clegg et al. 2007) when identity and legitimacy need to be continuously negotiated with diverse publics (Drori & Honig, 2013).

In Nordic contexts, standards of civic modesty, economic rationality, and linguistic homogeneity are often taken for granted (Stokke, 2013), so multicultural organizations incur additional symbolic burdens. Indeed, they are expected to simultaneously embody cohesion, neutrality, and cultural representation. As research on language-sensitive management has shown, language is not a neutral medium but rather a moral and political landscape through which credibility is earned and challenged (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Karhunen et al., 2018; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). Multilingualism, tone, and rhetoric therefore become proxies for legitimacy, so organizations must consider not just their actions but also how they “sound”, whom they are addressing, and the context. Legitimacy is also inseparable from identity, because both must be accomplished by interacting discursively with the public (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2023; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2011; Motion & Leitch, 2009).

Boundary-Making Logics and Categorization

Legitimacy is often disputed by using symbolic boundaries to classify actors into hierarchies of worth (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2008). These boundaries operate across moral, cultural, and economic dimensions to define who deserves support, recognition, or space, with this often solidifying material inequalities by shaping access to resources (Faist, 2013; Pachucki et al., 2007). In multicultural governance, heterogeneity is frequently framed as something “risky”, with inclusion being conditional on productivity and docility (Faist, 2013; Stokke, 2013).

Organization studies have shown that an organization's legitimacy is affected when it crosses categories. This "illegitimacy discount" reflects how category-spanning actors often lose credibility due to their audiences struggling to understand hybrid models (Zhao et al., 2013). Some overcome this through cultural entrepreneurship (Lo Verso, 2025), but others face delegitimation when the boundaries are reinforced (Radoynovska, 2018). Public hearings and policy forums discursively institutionalize symbolic distinctions, often in the name of the "general public interest" (Topal, 2009), with studies showing that legitimacy rests not just on alignment with established norms but also on how boundaries are constructed, inverted, or closed.

This study introduces the expression "boundary-making logics" to capture how publics draw on recurring evaluative frameworks to justify inclusion or exclusion. The label builds on scholarly studies of symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2008) and organizational boundary processes (Radoynovska, 2018). Here, however, it is developed inductively from the case material. These logics go beyond individual opinions by codifying moral, spatial, economic, or cultural criteria into classificatory schemes that define whether organizations are positioned as legitimate or illegitimate. In the Nordic setting, concepts of cohesion and reciprocity accentuate these boundaries (Kivisto & Wahlbeck, 2013; Stokke, 2013). As such, multicultural centers are tolerated when they appear useful and modest but disdained when they are perceived as excessive, wasteful, or symbolically intrusive.

Discursive Strategies for Delegitimation

Discursive approaches treat legitimacy not as a fixed resource but rather a performative accomplishment achieved through language. The four core strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis have been commonly identified in legitimation studies (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). Moreover, such strategies manifest not just in elitist and political discourses but also in vernacular publics that contest the legitimacy. Rhetorical resources—such as metaphors, narratives, and

irony—influence legitimacy judgments by linking organizations to broader ideological formations (Barros, 2014; Biscaro et al., 2025; Vaara & Monin, 2010).

In contested forums, these strategies are often adapted for delegitimation. Online forums have been widely studied as sites for legitimacy and identity to be challenged through everyday discourse. Research on social media and online communities has also shown how legitimation is achieved through dialogue with publics (Barros, 2014; Glozer et al., 2019), as well as how irony and affect circulate in forum interactions (Pettersson & Nortio, 2022). Broader studies of online publics have also emphasized how dynamics like echo chambers and hate speech can structure the circulation of legitimacy claims (Sunstein, 2018; Titley, 2019). Such studies highlight how in online arenas, legitimacy is contested in vernacular publics not in abstract terms but rather through concrete discursive strategies where such terms are adapted and revoiced.

Such resistance emerges through the use of parody, irony, and counter-arguments (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Symon, 2005) to present the official discourse as corrupt or absurd (Bauvois et al., 2022; Sakki & Hakoköngäs, 2022). Vernacular critiques operate affectively through ridicule, sarcasm, and grotesque metaphor, not just to highlight disagreement but also attach emotional weight to reshape organizational worth (Ahmed, 2014; Pettersson & Nortio, 2022). Studies of organizational discourse have demonstrated how stylistic and affective registers—such as tone, modality, and pronouns—can mediate the credibility of institutional claims (Crilly et al., 2016; Wodak, 2015). Affect is therefore not isolated from rhetoric but rather embedded in discourse as a tool for delegitimation.

Taken together, the above mechanisms present an opportunity for analyzing contested multicultural organizations. Legitimacy and identity are discursively accomplished in hybrid institutions, while symbolic boundaries regulate belonging and deservingness. Rhetorical and affective strategies then shape public evaluations. Although these mechanisms have often been studied in isolation, their convergence in vernacular publics remains underexplored. This study therefore integrates the insights from research on legitimacy, boundary-making, and discourse to reveal how language serves not only for communication but also as a means for symbolic control in contested civic

spaces. Online forums are particularly relevant here, because they articulate framings and affective registers that are not confined to small communities but rather circulate into the wider public debate, thus shaping common views about immigration and the legitimacy of multicultural initiatives (Glozer et al., 2019; Sunstein, 2018; Titley, 2019). From a discourse-historical perspective, online arenas can be seen as sites of interdiscursivity and intertextuality, ones where media reports, political statements, and civic commentaries are revoiced and reframed to shape the wider debate about legitimacy claims.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopted the discourse–historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak et al., 1999; Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 2015), which is a strand of critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2001) for examining how language produces, reproduces, and transforms power relations in a particular context. It approaches discourse as something both socially constituted and socially constitutive, and its analytical practice is explicitly normative. Its critique operates at three levels: immanent critique, which identifies contradictions within texts; socio-diagnostic critique, which links discursive features to broader ideological structures and institutions; and prognostic critique, which considers alternatives aimed at justice and inclusion. The approach also distinguishes four overlapping macro-functions of discourse—namely constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive—that together highlight how discursive practices shape institutions and collective life (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

A defining feature of DHA is the theorization of the context across four interlinked levels, namely immediate co-text, intertextual and interdiscursive relations, institutional and situational frames, and the wider sociopolitical environment. These levels are regarded as being recursive rather than hierarchical, so methodological triangulation is needed to connect micro-linguistic features

to macro-level ideological functions. This triangulation also extends across data types, theoretical tools, and discursive levels, thus reinforcing the validity of the interpretation through cross-checking.

This contextual orientation makes DHA particularly suitable for analyzing contested organizational legitimacy. In organization studies, legitimacy is established, or destabilized, through discursive practices among multiple sites and actors. DHA is sensitive to intertextuality and interdiscursivity, thus enabling us to study how institutional discourses, such as municipal policy strategies or media reports, are revoiced, inverted, or parodied in vernacular publics. Previous research has shed light on how organizations are discursively legitimized or delegitimized through authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), as well as through irony, parody, or affective registers (Barros, 2014; Glozer et al., 2019; Symon, 2005). In line with this literature stream, DHA provides a means for linking rhetorical strategies to broader ideological positions while considering the circulation of texts among forums, policy arenas, and media commentary (Motion & Leitch, 2009; Vaara & Monin, 2010).

Data Corpus

The data corpus was compiled between April and July 2025, with it comprising 13 primary documents relating to Saaga, a municipally funded multicultural center in Kouvola, Finland. A primary document here refers to a complete forum thread with a full comment chain, a news article with associated coverage, or a municipal policy document, with each being treated as a discrete unit of analysis. For analytical clarity, the 13 documents were grouped into five categories (see Table 1), specifically three Suomiz4 threads, six Hommaforum threads, two Reddit threads, 13 news articles treated as a single document, and three municipal policy documents again treated as a single document.

The bulk of the corpus comprised 756 posts drawn from the three abovementioned online forums, which together represent distinct segments of Finnish public discourse. More specifically, Suomiz4 is the country's largest general-purpose forum with an active "Society" section where social and

political issues are discussed anonymously in everyday language (Suomi24, 2025). Hommaforum, meanwhile, was established in 2008. It is a politically oriented platform associated with nationalist and anti-immigration perspectives, and posts there are typically longer and ideologically structured (Hommaforum, 2025). Finally, Reddit/r/Suomi attracts a younger and more diverse user base, so it provides a hybrid record of discussion (r/suomi, 2025). Threads from each platform were identified through keyword searches in both Finnish and English (e.g., “Monikulttuurikeskus Saaga”, “Saaga multicultural center”, “Kouvola Saaga”). Threads were selected when they directly referenced Saaga or its activities; contained explicit evaluations of legitimacy, belonging, or deservingness; and garnered sufficient engagement to constitute a debate.

For contrast with these forum discussions, 13 news articles mentioning Saaga were selected from YLE and *Kouvolan Sanomat*, with these covering events, controversies, and other recognitions between 2015 and 2024. The policy component, meanwhile, comprised the City of Kouvola’s *Kaikkien Kouvola* multicultural strategy (2019–2030) and its two interim reviews (2019–2022; 2023–2025), which are publicly available documents articulating the municipality’s integration goals (City of Kouvola, 2025). Taken together, the policy texts and media articles “present” Saaga’s legitimacy, while the forum threads overwhelmingly contest it. The resulting imbalance reflects the discursive environment, where the supportive framings remain largely institutional and generic, while contestation dominates in the vernacular publics.

The sources cover both vernacular publics and institutional framings, so they allow legitimacy to be analyzed from the “outside-in” (Symon, 2005; Topal, 2009). Background demographic and electoral data from the Official Statistics of Finland (OSF, 2025) and YLE Results Service (Ylen Vaalikone, 2025) were also consulted for context, although they were not analyzed directly. Overall, the corpus totaled some 31,384 words, which is equivalent to about 105–125 double-spaced pages of raw text in word-processed format.

All forum posts were translated from Finnish into English, anonymized, and stripped of identifiers. All quotes are presented in anonymized form, with the original Finnish being retained where the rhetorical nuance depends on language play. All the considered forum material was publicly accessible at

the time of collection, but no usernames are reported here. Table 1 presents the corpus by category, including approximate word counts.

Table 1. The grouped data sources and their analytical function within the DHA

Source	Data type	Description	Volume	Word Count (approx.)	Analytical function
1	Forum (Suomiz24)	Threads discussing Saaga's funding and activities	107 posts	4206	Framing of fiscal burden and cultural authenticity
2	Forum (Hommaforum)	Threads on Saaga's launch, events, and recruitment	407 posts	16229	Populist and nationalist tropes; moral order
3	Forum (Reddit r/Suomi)	Discussions of multiculturalism and Saaga	242 posts	3769	Broader demographic perspectives; ironic registers
4	Media (YLE, Kouvola Sanomat)	News coverage of Saaga, 2015–2024	13 articles	3340	Institutional and media framing
5	Municipal policy	City of Kouvola multicultural strategy 2019–2030, with interim reviews	3 documents	3840	Institutional anchor and policy legitimization

Source: Author’s own work.

Data-Analysis Procedure

Building on the DHA’s framework, as outlined above, the analysis proceeded sequentially. The coding drew on the full corpus of public online forums (Suomiz24, Hommaforum, Reddit/r/Suomi), news media (YLE and *Kouvolan Sanomat*), and the municipal policy documents outlined above. The debate around Saaga was rooted first within Kouvola’s demographic decline, diversification, and municipal integration policies, thus providing the background for contesting organizational

legitimacy. The material was then examined for recurring discourse topics across forums, media, and policy texts. Illustrative quotes were found to depict Saaga as fictive, corrupt, wasteful, or threatening, thus providing the thematic basis for subsequent coding.

These topics were analyzed using DHA's heuristic categories (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2001). Nomination strategies revealed how actors and institutions were labeled, while predication strategies showed how qualities—such as inefficiency, elitism, or danger—were attributed. Argumentation schemes drew on topoi such as fairness, burden, threat, efficiency, authenticity, justice, responsibility, competence, scarcity, and caution, while perspectivization revealed stance-taking through irony, sarcasm, and appeals to common sense. Finally, intensification or mitigation indicated how affect was modulated through ridicule and grotesque metaphor. These strategies provided the linguistic evidence for linking individual choices to recurring evaluative frames.

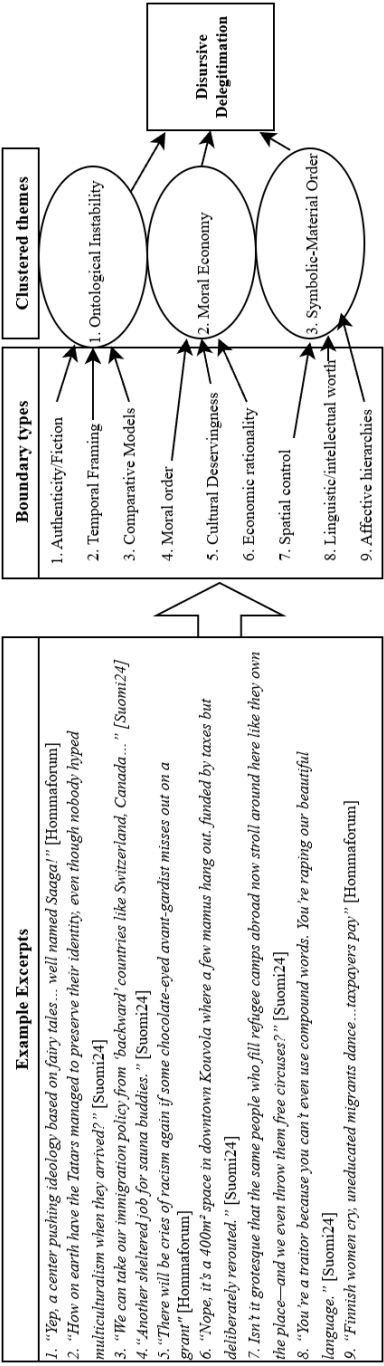
Intertextuality was then traced through participants citing, mocking, or revoicing headlines, budget figures, and municipal slogans. These references moved beyond their original context, with them often being inverted through parody or accusation. These intertextual inversions were central to the contestation. Attention was also paid to interdiscursivity, showing how discourses about welfare, migration, gender equality, national decline, and security were recontextualized within the Saaga debate, such that that organizational legitimacy was determined at the nexus of multiple discursive domains.

Through a recursive process, nine boundary-making logics were inductively generated: authenticity versus fiction, temporal framing, comparative models (global–local), moral order, cultural deservingness, economic rationality, spatial control, linguistic and intellectual worth, and affective hierarchies. This study introduces the term “boundary-making logics” to describe recurring evaluative frameworks that classify organizational worth and justify inclusion or exclusion through identifiable strategies, topoi, and affective registers. For clarity, these nine logics were collected into three broader clusters to reflect their evaluative orientation, namely ontological instability (authenticity/fiction,

temporal framing, comparative models), moral economy (moral order, cultural deservingness, affective hierarchies), and symbolic-material order (economic rationality, spatial control, linguistic and intellectual worth). Empirical details for these clusters are presented in the findings.

Figure 1 illustrates the analytical pathway from quotations to discourse topics, through DHA's heuristic categories, and ultimately to the nine boundary-making logics and their clustering.

Figure 1. Analytical pathway from quotations to discourse topics, boundary-making logics, clusters, and discursive delegitimation



Source: Author's own work.

Table 2 complements this figure by detailing each logic together with its discursive function, associated strategies, underlying topoi, typical linguistic realizations, intertextual references, and illustrative quotations.

Table 2. Boundary-making logics and illustrative strategies

Boundary type	Delegitimizing function	DHA strategies	Illustrative topoi	Example excerpt
1. Authenticity vs. Fiction	Saaga framed as theatrical or illusory	Nomination (“immigrant office”); predication (fictional); perspectivization (truth-tellers); irony/parody	Definition; Burden; Deception	“Yep, a center pushing ideology based on fairy tales... well named Saaga!” [Hommaforum]
2. Temporal Framing (Past vs. Present)	Narrative of nostalgic decline	Binaries (“before/now”); irony; synecdoche	Decline; Nostalgia; Continuity	“Before, Finns managed without projects... Now schemes suck taxpayer money” [Suomiz4]
3. Comparative Models (Global-Local)	Finland/Kouvola as naïve vs. “pragmatic” others	Comparative irony; model minorities; Sweden-as-cautionary-tale	Realism; Caution	“We can take our immigration policy from ‘backward’ countries like Switzerland, Canada...” [Suomiz4]
4. Moral Order (Clean vs. Corrupt)	Linked to nepotism, elite collusion	Nomination (closed circles); predication (parasitic, cronies); grotesque metaphor	Justice; Responsibility	“The small circle keeps spinning, all Saaga-paid hires are the same people” [Suomiz4]
5. Cultural Deservingness	Migrant beneficiaries depicted as idle/undeserving	Nomination (racial slurs); predication (lazy, parasitic); contrastive grievances	Fairness; Utility; Deviance	“My own child didn’t get into art academy... but these migrant artists get all the support” [Hommaforum]

Boundary type	Delegitimizing function	DHA strategies	Illustrative topoi	Example excerpt
6. Economic Rationality	Framed as fiscally irresponsible and wasteful	Predication (automatic spending machine); sarcasm; synecdoche	Burden; Efficiency; Scarcity	“Saaga is funded by taxes, but the issue is hidden” [Suomi24]
7. Spatial Control	Downtown presence reframed as intrusion	Nomination (Somali clans, city center); containment tropes; irony	Invasion; Ownership; Burden	“Property value drops if ‘enrichment’ moves in” [Suomi24]
8. Linguistic/Intellectual Worth	Migrants depicted as incompetent	Predication (skill-less, layabouts); language policing; ridicule	Competence; Utility; Fairness	“All these nonsense projects where someone writes ‘Finland’ wrong and it’s counted as art” [Hommaforum]
9. Affective Hierarchies	Migrants undeserving of empathy	Sarcasm; parody of compassion; epithets	Justice; Threat; Ridicule	“Finnish women cry, uneducated migrants dance... taxpayers pay” [Hommaforum]

Source: Author’s own work.

This study was conducted by a single researcher who is himself an immigrant to Finland with proficient Finnish and familiarity with Saaga through local networks and participation in its activities. This position provided some sensitivity to linguistic nuance and organizational practice, but it also required reflexive awareness of potential interpretive bias. Translations and coding decisions were aimed at preserving irony, idioms, and rhetorical nuance, with the original Finnish being retained where the meaning depended on local phrasing. It is also worth noting that the reliance on Finnish-language forums inevitably foregrounds native-speaker perspectives in which contestation was far more common than support. Supportive comments did appear, but they were rare, fragmented, or playfully framed. This asymmetry is in itself a key empirical finding, because it reveals how legitimacy

work in vernacular publics is heavily skewed toward contestation, while affirmative legitimacy work is largely confined to institutional discourse. The analysis was therefore informed by the researcher's standpoint while remaining grounded in how the publics themselves constructed and contested Saaga's legitimacy.

Contextualization: Saaga and Kouvola

Finland is the broader institutional and political setting within which Saaga's legitimacy is contested. Despite the country ranking highly in international integration indexes (Huddleston et al., 2024; MCP, 2025), narratives of inclusion coexist uneasily with discourses that emphasize cultural homogeneity (Keskinen et al., 2019). Diversity is frequently framed as something that disrupts national unity and contrasted with values like gender equality and welfare solidarity (Menard, 2016; Tuori, 2007). Since 2008, the Finns Party has mainstreamed a nationalist-welfare discourse that positions immigration as a threat to both welfare provision and national identity (Horsti & Nikunen, 2013; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Similar discourses circulate widely in traditional and social media, with multiculturalism critiques often being presented as rational concerns (Keskinen et al., 2019; Pettersson & Nortio, 2022).

In Kouvola, a medium-sized city in southeastern Finland, such discourses resonate strongly at the municipal level. Kouvola's population has been declining since the early 2000s, with this being accompanied by rising dependency ratios and weak economic growth. Simultaneously, linguistic diversity has risen from 1.4% to nearly 6% of residents in 2024 (OSF, 2025). In a context of demographic decline and fiscal constraints, multicultural initiatives are frequently portrayed as a burden on local welfare capacity. Moreover, electoral results reflect this tension, with support for the Finns Party in the city having risen from 6.8% in 2008 to 21.5% in 2021. While its support has since declined in the 2025 projections, its discursive influence continues (Ylen Vaalikone, 2025). Debates about municipal funding further reinforce the volatility. For example, Saaga received nearly €940,000 in municipal and national funding between 2017 and 2023, although some project proposals, particularly those aimed at visibility and

media presence, were rejected (STEA, 2025). Online discussions often frame such selective funding as evidence of ideological bias or favoritism.

Within this context, the Saaga multicultural center is municipally funded to support inclusion through language education, translation, youth work, and intercultural events. It is a central plank of Kouvola's official integration strategy, *Kaikkien Kouvola* (2019–2025) (City of Kouvola, 2025), with it being positioned both as a service provider and a symbol of openness. This symbolic role has exposed Saaga to criticism, however, with events like “Iraq Night” being interpreted more as boundary violations than cultural exchanges. As such, Saaga is seldom seen as a pragmatic service provider responding to demographic needs. Instead, it has become a symbolic node where anxieties about immigration, demographic decline, and elite moralism converge. Saaga therefore exemplifies how an organization can become a condensation symbol (Wodak et al., 1999), one where local practices acquire disproportionate symbolic weight. Its contested nature represents a compelling case for analyzing how an institution's legitimacy can be challenged and undone in vernacular publics.

Findings: The Boundary-Making Logics of Legitimacy

This section presents nine boundary-making logics that were identified from the data. They are grouped into three clusters, namely ontological instability, moral economy, and symbolic–material order. Figure 1 and Table 2 present the analytical pathway and detailed coding schema that guided the presentation of these findings.

Ontological Instability

Forum discussions repeatedly belittled Saaga's very existence as a credible civic institution. Rather than evaluating its programs, however, forum users framed the center as being fictive, anachronistic, or globally misaligned.

One recurring theme depicted Saaga as something fictional or theatrical rather than a “real” civic actor. Through nomination and predication, it was labelled a “fairy-tale aunt”, a “fantasy project”, or “an extension of the immigrant office”. Even its name was targeted: “Yep, a center pushing an ideology based on fairy tales... well named Saaga!” [Hommaforum]. Forum users presented themselves as taxpayers or whistleblowers unmasking deception, while ironic exaggerations were applied to intensify the critique, such as by sarcastically suggesting a “nation-shaking catastrophe” should Saaga were to close. These strategies drew on the topoi of definition (“storytelling is not real work”), burden (“a waste of taxpayers’ money”), and deception (“multiculturalism means only Muslim-themed events”). Municipal slogans about “bridge-building” were revoiced as “synergy bridges” devoid of meaning, thus exemplifying the intertextual inversion.

A second logic relied on temporal framing: Critics contrasted the disciplined, industrious “before” with a lazy, wasteful “now”, thus presenting structural change as a sign of decline. One poster remarked: “Before, Finns managed without migrant pampering and endless projects... Now these schemes suck up taxpayer money” [Suomiz4]. Nostalgic binary positions painted the past as coherent and self-sufficient, while the present was portrayed as parasitic and fragmented by “project culture”. Empty downtown buildings were used as symbols of civic decline.

The third logic positioned Saaga within global–local comparisons, with forum participants using international benchmarks to present Kouvola’s policies as naïve. Switzerland, Canada, Australia, and Japan were praised for their “healthy, self-interested” immigration policies. Moreover, such countries were sarcastically described as “backward” to highlight the perceived folly of Finland: “We can take our immigration policy directly from ‘backward’ countries like Switzerland, Canada, Australia, and Japan... They have healthy, self-interested principles” [Suomiz4]. Sweden was also invoked as a cautionary tale, while the Tatars were celebrated as a “model minority”.

Moral Economy

While the first cluster challenged Saaga’s very existence, the second set of logics disputed its moral standing and economic justification. Forum users framed

the center as being corrupt, undeserving, or fiscally parasitic. These critiques rarely invoked any overt ethnic exclusion but rather mobilized the language of fairness, justice, and responsibility.

One logic portrayed Saaga as being plagued by cronyism. Through nomination, familiar figures were identified in phrases like “the same people rotate in these circles”, with predication casting them as self-serving parasites. One poster expressed: “The small circle keeps spinning—all Saaga-paid hires are the same people” [Suomi24]. Perspectivization, meanwhile, was used to position the critics as betrayed taxpayers or whistleblowers, with grotesque metaphors like “ghosts lingering in politics” intensifying the critique. Arguments were rooted in the topoi of justice (“jobs are already decided”), responsibility (“taxpayers betrayed”), and abuse (“the city even pays rent twice”). Municipal records and media coverage were revoiced as evidence of corruption, thereby inverting the official intention.

A second logic tool took aim at the beneficiaries, with migrants being labelled with pejoratives like “matu” (a Finnish slur derived from *maahanmuuttaja*, meaning ‘immigrant’) or other racialized slurs and presented as being idle or frivolous. Programs were trivialized by reducing a broad set of activities to things like “scribbling and dancing”. The critics also presented themselves as parents to claim moral authority: “My own child didn’t get into the art academy...but these migrant artists get all the support” [Hommaforum]. Arguments drew on the topoi of fairness (“our children are overlooked”), utility (“they never learn Finnish”), and deviance (“uneducated layabouts as artists”). Irony and ridicule were used to further intensify these claims and present exclusion as common sense.

A third logic portrayed Saaga as being fiscally irresponsible. Nomination emphasized its role as a “multicultural business”, while predication cast it as an “automatic spending machine” and “hobby society”. The critics positioned themselves as aggrieved taxpayers uncovering wasteful practices: “Saaga is funded by taxes, but the issue is hidden” [Suomi24]. Hyperbole was also used to inflate relatively modest sums into “tens of millions”. The argumentation drew on the topoi of burden (“few benefit, many pay”), efficiency (“no return on investment”), and scarcity (“our poor neglected”). Users selectively cited budget figures from municipal and media reports to reframe them as evidence of waste. Fiscal metaphors and sarcastic comparisons then transformed the economic critique into one of moral condemnation.

The Symbolic–Material Order

Beyond its very existence and moral standing, Saaga was also challenged about its location in the city, its linguistic practices, and the affective registers circulating around it. Such criticisms highlight the symbolic–material dimensions of legitimacy, showing how worth is judged based not just on policies or services but also physical presence, communicative forms, and emotional positioning.

One prominent thread targeted Saaga's downtown location. Spatial markers like "the city center" or "former commercial buildings" were presented as being degraded by the migrant presence, with them portraying downtown Kouvola as becoming a "future ghetto" or "landfill". The critics positioned themselves as property owners or guardians of order: "It would be concerning if a big empty building was next door... property value drops if 'enrichment' moves in" [Suomiz4]. This was then intensified through irony and grotesque metaphors, such as in a quip that the old Chinatown "could hold Somalis by the clan". Arguments drew on the topoi of invasion, ownership, and burden, thus casting Saaga as an illegitimate use of civic space. Municipal rhetoric about "safe spaces" and "everyone's Kouvola" was also inverted and reframed as privilege.

A second logic centered on language and intellectual worth. Migrants associated with Saaga were labelled with pejoratives like "layabouts" (*gutaleet*) and "skill-less migrants" (*taidottomat mamut*). They were portrayed as being incapable of making meaningful contribution, with misspellings, "scribbling", and "simplified Finnish" (*selkokieli*) being mocked as symbols of incompetence: "All these nonsense projects where someone writes 'Finland' wrong and it's counted as art...what's the point?!" [Hommaforum]. Critics positioned themselves as the guardians of standards or taxpayers demanding value for their money, with ridicule and derisive humor intensifying the debate. Arguments invoked the topoi of competence ("those who cannot master Finnish should not be supported"), utility ("interpreters at night are wasteful"), and fairness ("our own unemployed youth get less support").

A third logic used affective hierarchies to challenge legitimacy. Migrants were framed as being undeserving of empathy, while native Finns were positioned as neglected victims. Sarcasm mimicked the official compassion in order to invert it:

“Finnish women cry, uneducated migrants dance... taxpayers pay” [Hommaforum]. The perceived imbalance was therefore dramatized by contrasting emotional indulgence on one side with deprivation on the other. Arguments drew on the topoi of justice (unequal distribution), threat (imbalanced compassion undermining cohesion), and composure (rationality being the marker of deservingness). Intensification occurred by using parody and epithets to reinforce exclusion: “There will be cries of racism again if some chocolate-eyed avant-gardist misses out on a grant” [Hommaforum]. Municipal and media reports of Saaga’s events were sarcastically presented as evidence of indulgence or naïveté.

Discussion

The above analysis demonstrates how Saaga, as a municipal multicultural center, became a condensation symbol through which broader anxieties about immigration, cohesion, and governance were expressed. The findings resonate with prior research that has shown how organizational existence is discursively precarious, so it needs to be continually negotiated in public arenas (Brown, 1994; Clegg et al., 2007; Drori & Honig, 2013; Golant & Sillince, 2007).

Ontological instability was evident in the way in which online users framed Saaga as fictive, decadent, or globally naïve. Legitimacy was also undermined by semantically mocking the center’s name and purpose. Narratives of civic decline were also interdiscursively linked with national debates about immigration, cohesion, and degeneration (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Global–local comparisons were deployed to portray Kouvolaa’s policies as naïve, with Switzerland, Canada, or Japan being invoked as “healthy” contrasts (Clegg et al., 2007; Drori & Honig, 2013). The strategies of ironic nomination, parodic predication, nostalgic perspectivization, and interdiscursive comparison thereby converged to destabilize Saaga’s ontological grounding and symbolically exclude it from being recognized as a credible civic actor.

The findings extend the research on discursive legitimation strategies. Prior studies have identified authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis as central mechanisms (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Van Leeuwen

& Wodak, 1999). In vernacular publics, however, moral evaluation and rationalization were the most prominent mechanisms. Critics appealed to senses of fairness, justice, and fiscal responsibility (Fortier, 2010; Lamont & Molnár, 2002), often positioning themselves as taxpayers or guardians of order, while economic rationalizations were used to frame multicultural initiatives as wasteful or parasitic. Authorization and mythopoesis, normally frequent in elite discourse, were largely absent.

The second cluster emphasized moral economy, with Saaga being depicted as corrupt, undeserving, or fiscally parasitic. This resonates with studies showing how accusations of collusion and moral contamination undo legitimacy without any overt ethnic rejection (Douglas, 1966; Lamont, 2002; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Vernacular critiques also echoed the trope of the “integration business” (*kotouttamisbisnes*), linking local disputes to broader discourses of deservingness (Faist, 2013; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Economic critiques reframed Saaga as a “spending machine”, in line with prior work showing how financial rationalizations serve as neutral-seeming justifications for exclusion (Clegg et al., 2007; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Drori & Honig, 2013; Elsbach, 1994; Motion & Leitch, 2009). These mechanisms challenged legitimacy through fairness and fiscal discipline, redirecting sympathy away from migrants toward “real” Finns.

The third cluster concerned the symbolic–material order. Saaga’s downtown location was presented as a civic intrusion, echoing previous findings about how geography mediates exclusion (Clegg et al., 2007; Cresswell, 1996; Wimmer, 2008). Its linguistic and intellectual worth was also questioned by mocking migrants’ simplified Finnish or artistic expressions, confirming how symbolic reductions undermine credibility (Fredriksson et al., 2006; Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Karhunen et al., 2018). Affective hierarchies further positioned migrants as undeserving of sympathy and Finns as neglected victims, in line with research showing how ridicule and emotional registers regulate legitimacy (Ahmed, 2014; Symon, 2005; Vaara, 2014). Indeed, emotional registers like resentment, sarcasm, and ridicule (Ahmed, 2014; Fortier, 2010) were not incidental but rather central to defining boundaries around undeserving migrants, corrupt elites, and betrayed taxpayers. Legitimacy was therefore challenged through Saaga’s locations,

communicative forms, and affective positioning, revealing how themes of space, language, and emotion converge for symbolic delegitimation.

The DHA framework helps explain how these boundaries were established through language. Nomination and predication labelled Saaga as fictive and corrupt, while argumentation invoked the topoi of burden and fairness. Perspectivization used irony and sarcasm to express stance, while ridicule and grotesque metaphors intensified affect. Boundaries were not abstract categories but rather discursive accomplishments, being drawn, reinforced, and contested through linguistic choices. This underlines the social materiality of discourse, with names, slogans, spaces, and even misspellings becoming tokens in legitimacy contests (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2023), thus demonstrating how symbolic resources acquire political weight in vernacular publics.

The findings also bring the multiculturalism debate into focus. Organizations like Saaga realize multicultural policy in everyday life, thus becoming condensation symbols for the multicultural ideology. Vernacular publics, however, reframe such initiatives as fictional, corrupt, or intrusive. Rather than rejecting diversity outright, critics mobilize concepts of fairness, efficiency, and common sense to re-signify multiculturalism as parasitic or misplaced. Thus, multiculturalism is not debated in abstract policy terms but rather through everyday notions of fairness, spatial propriety, linguistic competence, and affective worth. A neutral integration program then becomes a question of who deserves space, resources, and empathy. This mirrors Nordic and European research showing how multiculturalism is presented as a threat to cohesion and welfare solidarity (Faist, 2013; Keskinen et al., 2019; Tuori, 2007). By showing how multiculturalism is discursively contested through organizational symbols, this study highlights how legitimacy efforts go beyond political elites into everyday publics.

Conclusions

This study revealed how the legitimacy and identity of Saaga, a municipally funded multicultural center in Kouvola, Finland, were contested in vernacular

publics. Through a discourse–historical analysis of forum discussions, media reports, and municipal policy documents, it identified nine boundary-making logics regulating legitimacy across ontological, moral, and symbolic–material dimensions. Rather than being evaluated simply as a service provider, Saaga was recast as fictive, corrupt, parasitic, or misplaced, demonstrating how legitimacy can be undone in everyday discourse.

Theoretically, this study advances legitimacy research by introducing a framework that captures how publics rearticulate evaluative criteria across authenticity, fairness, spatial propriety, temporal nostalgia, economic rationality, and cultural deservingness. In doing so, it extends prior accounts of legitimation (Drori & Honig, 2013; Suchman, 1995; Vaara & Tienari, 2008) by demonstrating how vernacular publics, rather than just elites, discursively redraw organizational boundaries. It also highlights how affective hierarchies like resentment, sarcasm, and ridicule serve as mechanisms for civic sorting, thereby extending affect theory (Ahmed, 2014; Fortier, 2010) to the study of organizational legitimacy.

The analysis also shows how civic organizations can become condensation symbols for wider ideological struggles in multiculturalism debates. Saaga was used to express anxieties about fairness, belonging, civic decline, and national identity. These were framed within everyday criteria of fairness, spatial propriety, linguistic competence, and affective worth, showing that support for multicultural inclusion is not determined just by policies or programs alone—it is also mediated by rhetorical and affective strategies in public arenas. In this sense, this study contributes to multiculturalism research by showing how civic organizations become key sites for condensing and contesting cultural ideologies.

Methodologically, the study applies the discourse–historical approach (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2001) to irony-rich online forums where anonymity facilitates parody, semantic destabilization, and intertextual inversion. This demonstrates the approach's value for analyzing dispersed publics and connecting organizational legitimacy studies with cultural discourse analysis in digital contexts (Barros, 2014; Glozer et al., 2019).

The findings have implications for municipalities, civic organizations, and policymakers. For municipalities, legitimacy cannot be assumed to follow from

endorsements or branding. Indeed, projects perceived as “project culture” or fiscally wasteful can be easily contested, making transparent communication about funding, siting, and programming essential. For civic organizations, language politics are central: Symbolic slogans are vulnerable to ridicule, so legitimacy depends on adapting communication to how publics revoice discourse and demonstrating reciprocity by emphasizing benefits for both migrant and host communities. At the policy level, legitimacy should be viewed as an ongoing accomplishment rather than a given. Integration strategies should therefore foster dialogue with publics and use participatory forums to address grievances, diffuse polarized emotions, and reinforce civic belonging.

This study is not without limitations, however. It was restricted to publicly available online data, thus ignoring the participants’ underlying intentions and offline interactions. The translation from Finnish to English may have also affected stylistic nuance despite efforts to retain key terms. The single-case design also prioritized depth and contextual fit, with any transferability resting on theorized mechanisms rather than local specificity.

It is important to note that the analyzed material predominantly reflected critical or ironic voices. Supportive or affirming comments appeared only sporadically, and their relative absence partly results from the choice of Finnish-language forums, which tend to attract native-speaker publics already integrated into local life. Including English-language discussions or migrant-authored narratives could have introduced more balanced perspectives. This asymmetry, however, is itself analytically meaningful, revealing how delegitimation dominates vernacular arenas.

Future research could explore whether more supportive publics counter or reframe delegitimation logics, how online and offline discourses interact in shaping legitimacy, and whether similar dynamics occur in less welfare-oriented contexts. By focusing on vernacular publics, this study positions organizational legitimacy within broader cultural debates about migration, multiculturalism, and civic belonging, thus offering a transferable framework for analyzing contested multicultural institutions in post-industrial societies.

References

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Barros, M. (2014). Tools of legitimacy: The case of the Petrobras corporate blog. *Organization Studies*, 35(8), 1211–1230.

Bauvois, G., Pyrhönen, N., & Pyysiäinen, J. (2022). Underdogs shepherding the flock—Discursive outgrouping of ‘the Internal Enemy’ in online discussions. In K. Petterson, & E. Nortio (Eds.), *The far-right discourse of multiculturalism in intergroup interactions* (pp. 51–78). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Biscaro, C., Bruni, E., Cornelissen, J., & Oswick, C. (2025). Metaphor and organization studies: Going beyond resonance to further theory and practice. *Organization Studies*, 46(5), 745–766.

Brickson, S. L. (2005). Organizational identity orientation: Forging a link between organizational identity and organizations’ relations with stakeholders. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50, 576–609.

Brown, A. D. (1994). Politics, symbolic action and myth making in pursuit of legitimacy. *Organization Studies*, 15(6), 861–878.

Brown, A. D., & Toyoki, S. (2013). Identity work and legitimacy. *Organization Studies*, 34(7), 875–896.

Chen, Y.-W., & Kwitonda, J. C. (2021). Paradoxes of belonging, organizing, and agency: Integrating and differentiating divergent strategic logics in supported social enterprises. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 15(4), 310–327.

City of Kouvola (2025). *Kaikkien Kouvola 2023–2025: Monikulttuurisuustyön kehittämissuunnitelma*. Kouvola: City of Kouvola. Retrieved from https://www.kouvola.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/kaikkien_kouvola_2023-2025.pdf. Accessed 3 August 2025.

Clegg, S. R., Rhodes, C., & Kornberger, M. (2007). Desperately seeking legitimacy: Organizational identity and emerging industries. *Organization Studies*, 28(4), 495–513.

Cnossen, B., & Bencherki, N. (2023). Artful legitimacy: The role of materiality in practices of legitimation. *Organization Studies*, 44(6), 919–938.

Cresswell, T. (1996). *In place/out of place: Geography, ideology, and transgression* (NED – New edition ed.). Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Crilly, D., Hansen, M., & Zollo, M. (2016). The grammar of decoupling: A cognitive-linguistic perspective on firms' sustainability claims and stakeholders' interpretation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(2), 705–729.

Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London and New York: Routledge.

Dowling, J., & Pfeffer, J. (1975). Organizational legitimacy: Social values and organizational behavior. *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 18(1), 122–136.

Drori, I., & Honig, B. (2013). A process model of internal and external legitimacy. *Organization Studies*, 34(3), 345–376.

Elsbach, K. D. (1994). Managing organizational legitimacy in the California cattle industry: The construction and effectiveness of verbal accounts. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39(1), 57–88.

Faist, T. (2013). Multiculturalism: From heterogeneities to social (in)equalities. In P. Kivisto, & Ö. Wahlbeck (Eds.), *Debating multiculturalism in the Nordic welfare states* (pp. 22–47). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fortier, A.-M. (2010). Proximity by design? Affective citizenship and the management of unease. *Citizenship Studies*, 14(1), 17–30.

Fredriksson, R., Barner-Rasmussen, W., & Piekkari, R. (2006). The multinational corporation as a multilingual organization: The notion of a common corporate language. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 11(4), 406–423.

Glozer, S., Caruana, R., & Hibbert, S. A. (2019). The never-ending story: Discursive legitimization in social media dialogue. *Organization Studies*, 40(5), 625–650.

Golant, B. D., & Sillince, J. A. (2007). The constitution of organizational legitimacy: A narrative perspective. *Organization Studies*, 28(8), 1149–1167.

Good, K. R. (2009). *Municipalities and multiculturalism: The politics of immigration in Toronto and Vancouver*. Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press.

Graham, T. (2015). Everyday political talk in the Internet- based public sphere. In S. Coleman, & D. Freelon (Eds.), *Handbook of Digital Politics* (pp. 247–263). The University of Leeds.

Hardy, C., & Maguire, S. (2010). Discourse, field-configuring events, and change in organizations and institutional fields: Narratives of DDT and the Stockholm Convention. *Academy of Management*, 53(6), 1365–1392.

Hauser, G. A. (1999). *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*. South Carolina: Univ of South Carolina Press.

Hommaforum (2025). *Hommaforum*. Retrieved from <https://www.hommaforum.org/>. Accessed 3 August 2025.

Horsti, K., & Nikunen, K. (2013). The ethics of hospitality in changing journalism: A response to the rise of the anti-immigrant movement in Finnish media publicity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(4), 489–504.

Huddleston, T., Bilgili, O., Joki, A.-L., & Vankova, Z. (2024). *Migrant Integration Policy index*. Barcelona/Brussels: CIDOB and MPG.

Karhunen, P., Kankaanranta, A., Louhiala-Salminen, L., & Piekkari, R. (2018). Let's talk about language: A review of language-sensitive research in international management. *Journal of Management Studies*, 55(6), 980–1013.

Keskinen, S., Skaptadóttir, U. D., & Toivanen, M. (2019). Narrations of homogeneity, waning welfare states, and the politics of solidarity. In S. Keskinen, U.D. Skaptadóttir, & M. Toivanen (Eds.), *Undoing homogeneity in the Nordic region: migration, difference and the politics of solidarity*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Kivisto, P., & Wahlbeck, Ö. (2013). Debating multiculturalism in the Nordic welfare states. In P. Kivisto, & Ö. Wahlbeck (Eds.), *Debating multiculturalism in the Nordic welfare states* (pp. 1–21). Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lamont, M. (2002). *The dignity of working men: Morality and the boundaries of race, class, and immigration*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation at Harvard University Press.

Lamont, M., & Molnár, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 167–195.

Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, A. (2011). Organizations as discursive constructions: A Foucauldian approach. *Organization Studies*, 32(9), 1247–1271.

Lo Verso, A. C. (2025). Cultural entrepreneurship and field dynamics: Narrative strategies for distinctive identities in unsettled fields. *Organization Studies*, 46(3), 325–354.

Marschan-Piekkari, R., Welch, D., & Welch, L. (1999). In the shadow: The impact of language on structure, power and communication in the multinational. *International Business Review*, 8(4), 421–440.

MCP (2025). *Multiculturalism Policy Index*. Retrieved from <http://www.queensu.ca/mcp/>. Accessed 4 August 2025.

Menard, R. (2016). Doing equality and difference: Representation and alignment in Finnish identification. *Text & Talk*, 36(6), 733–755.

Monikulttuurikeskus Saaga (2025). *Monikulttuurikeskus Saaga*. Retrieved from <https://www.visitsaaga.fi/>. Accessed 3 August 2025.

Motion, J., & Leitch, S. (2009). The transformational potential of public policy discourse. *Organization Studies*, 30(10), 1045–1061.

Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) (2025). *Statistics Finland*. Retrieved from <https://stat.fi/en/statistics/documentation/vaerak>. Accessed 3 August 2025.

Pachucki, M. A., Pendergrass, S., & Lamont, M. (2007). Boundary processes: Recent theoretical developments and new contributions. *Poetics*, 35, 331–351.

Pettersson, K., & Nortio, E. (2022). Introduction: The far-right discourse on multiculturalism in intergroup interactions. In K. Pettersson, & E. Nortio (Eds.), *The far-right discourse of multiculturalism in intergroup interactions: A critical discursive perspective* (pp. 1–24). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

r/Suomi (2025). *Reddit*. Retrieved from <https://www.reddit.com/r/Suomi/>. Accessed 3 August 2025.

Radoynovska, N. M. (2018). Working within discretionary boundaries: Allocative rules, exceptions, and the micro-foundations of inequ(al)ity. *Organization Studies*, 39(9), 1277–1298.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2001). *Discourse and discrimination: Rhetorics of racism and antisemitism*. London: Routledge.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2009). The discourse-historical approach (DHA). In R. Wodak, & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: SAGE Publishing Ltd.

Sakhi, I., & Hakohöngäs, E. (2022). A critical discursive psychological study of dialogical constructions of hate-speech in established media and online discussions. In K. Pettersson, & E. Nortio (Eds.), *The far-right discourse of multiculturalism in intergroup interactions* (pp. 85–111). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sakhi, I., & Pettersson, K. (2016). Discursive constructions of otherness in populist radical right political blogs. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(2), 156–170.

STEa (2025). *Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden avustuskeskus*. Retrieved from <https://avustukset.stea.fi/organisation/1020>. Accessed 4 August 2025.

Stokke, H. (2013). Nordic multiculturalism: Commonalities and differences. In P. Kivisto, & Ö. Wahlbeck (Eds.), *Debating multiculturalism in the Nordic welfare states* (pp. 74–109). Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 571–610.

Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (NED – New edition ed.). Princeton University Press.

Suomi24 (2025). *Suomi* 24. Retrieved from <https://keskustelu.suomi24.fi/>. Accessed 3 August 2025.

Symon, G. (2005). Exploring resistance from a rhetorical perspective. *Organization Studies*, 26(11), 1641–1663.

Titely, G. (2019). *Racism and Media* (1st Edition ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Topal, C. (2009). The construction of general public interest: Risk, legitimacy, and power in a public hearing. *Organization Studies*, 30(2–3), 277–300.

Tuori, S. (2007). Cooking nation: Gender equality and multiculturalism as nation-building discourses. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 14(1), 21–35.

Vaara, E. (2014). Struggles over legitimacy in the Eurozone crisis: Discursive legitimation strategies and their ideological underpinnings. *Discourse & Society*, 25(4), 500–518.

Vaara, E., & Monin, P. (2010). A recursive perspective on discursive legitimation and organizational action in mergers and acquisitions. *Organization Science*, 21(1), 3–22.

Vaara, E., & Tienari, J. (2008). A discursive perspective on legitimation strategies in multinational corporations. *Academy of Management Review*, 33(4), 985–999.

Van Leeuwen, T., & Wodak, R. (1999). Legitimizing immigration control: A discourse-historical analysis. *Discourse Studies*, 1(1), 83–118.

Wimmer, A. (2008). The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: A multilevel process theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 113(4), 970–1022.

Wodak, R. (2001). The discourse-historical approach. In R. Wodak, & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 63–93). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.

Wodak, R., Cillia, R. d., Reisigl, M., & Liebhart, K. (1999). *The discursive construction of national identity* (2nd ed., Vol. 10). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ylen Vaalikone (2025). *Ylen Vaalikone*. Retrieved from <https://vaalit.yle.fi/kv2025/tulospalvelu/en/>. Accessed 3 August 2025.

Zhao, E. Y., Ishihara, M., & Lounsbury, M. (2013). Overcoming the illegitimacy discount: Cultural entrepreneurship in the US feature film industry. *Organization Studies*, 34(12), 1747–1776.

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0019

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Jesse W. C. Yip

Department of Linguistics and Modern Language Studies, The Education University of Hong Kong

jwcyip@eduhk.hk

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8260-0119

Jeff H. Y. Lau

Saint Francis University, Hong Kong

hylau@sfu.edu.hk

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3708-4151

Ka Ching Kelsey Pang

Department of Linguistics and Modern Language Studies, The Education University of Hong Kong

kelcpang@hku.hk

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-8108-2376

Discursive Leadership in
the Beatles' Lyrics: Positioning,
Feminism, and the Cultural
Management of Meaning

Article history:**Received** 16 September 2025**Revised** 11 November 2025**Accepted** 13 November 2025**Available online** 16 December 2025

Abstract: Previous studies examining feminist elements in Beatles songs primarily focus on critical and qualitative analysis of the narratives within the lyrics, often overlooking the dynamics of power between males and females, as well as their roles in relationships. More importantly, the leadership discursively constructed and performed by the band has been underexplored, despite its impact on the cultural management of the meanings of genders. Drawing upon positioning theory, this study conducts a thematic analysis supplemented by corpus linguistic analysis to uncover the predominant themes in the lyrics of Beatles songs released in 1963 and 1964. This study elucidates how the Beatles discursively positioned males in relation to females, especially in romantic relationships, in lyrics that apparently reflect feminism, as well as the cultural management conducted by the band. The thematic analysis reveals that a significant portion of the lyrical content relates to feminist themes, where females are positioned as having a higher interpersonal status alongside male empowerment. Conversely, males are portrayed as sacrificers who offer unconditional love to females, despite the challenges posed by the latter. It is argued that the Beatles are cultural leaders managing social perceptions on gender equality through discursive positioning strategies in the lyrics, and that language plays an important role in (re)shaping gender identities that challenge conventional images of gender in society.

Keywords: cultural management, feminism, lyrics, discursive leadership, positioning theory

Introduction

The Beatles, consisting of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Starr, were an English rock band active in Liverpool in the 1960s, and are regarded as the most influential band of all time (Hasted, 2017). A significant number of popular and long-lasting songs were created by the band, including *Can't Buy Me Love* (1963), *Love Me Do* (1962), *Yesterday* (1965), *Let It Be* (1969), among others. What set the band apart from, and made them more successful than, other widely acclaimed musicians were their feminine and feminist elements. These included their appearance with mop-top hairdos, collarless onstage outfits, as well as the content of their song lyrics, which helped the band develop a feminist ideology in society, challenging long-standing masculine ideologies and practice (Driver, 2007; Stark, 2005). Beatlemania was a cultural movement characterized by the rise of female status along with female audiences' frenetic state, hysteric craze, and adulation—a melodramatic mode—in the U.K. and the U.S.A. (O'Toole, 2016). Melodrama features include exaggeration, hysterical musical expressions, crying, and conflicts between the good and the evil, or the powerless and the powerful, to display feelings of opposition (Kapurch, 2016). This description does not intend to depict females as negative entities, but rather to highlight what Millard (2012) claims is the first and most dramatic uprising of women's sexual revolution (p. 134). Therefore, this cultural movement had a profound impact on women's roles in self-discovery, politics and society at a time when women were seeking liberation from traditional domestic roles (Stark, 2005).

The Beatles played a key role in the counterculture movements that arrived in the 1960s and significantly influenced the new youth (Driver, 2007). Scholars and experts have detailed the colossal impact of the Beatles' music and their distinct culture, Beatlemania¹, on audiences, especially women (O'Toole, 2016;

¹ *Beatlemania*: The cultural product of the Beatles' uniqueness and proto-typicality shaped by sweeping adulation among fans, mostly females, in the U.K. and the U.S.A. Also, the memories of *Beatlemania* had a far-reaching influence on its heated cultural formation in society (Driver, 2007, p. 74–75).

Schneider, 2016). The band surpassed numerous internationally acclaimed stars, such as Elvis Presley, nearly all of whom many teenage females had shown staunch support to (Deboick, 2017). Kapurch (2016) suggests that the Beatles served as a vehicle for females to rise against social limitations and stereotypes of gender and sexuality. This assertion is also supported by historian Elaine Tyler May, who claims that the Beatles set tone for feminism (Stark, 2005, p. 4). Feminism is the belief in equality among all genders, encompassing a range of socio-political movements that advocate for equal opportunities in all aspects of life, as well as greater intellectual and financial independence for women (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2010). Feminism challenges systemic inequalities and the underlying assumptions of gender ideologies, particularly those that place women in disadvantageous positions (Mohapatra, 2009). Women have begun to find themselves *awake* in a world dominated by stereotypical and socially constructed gender norms. Such ossified norms were to be addressed in the melodramatic feature of their music as “vehicles for girls to negotiate gender and sexuality” and “...that critique social norms related to masculinity and femininity” (Kapurch, 2016, p. 200). The band was the key to women’s liberation of their pent-up emotions and desires for freedom (Frith, 1984). Given this context, it is reasonable to infer that the songs of the Beatles and Beatlemania established a relationship with audiences through music inextricably linked to *feminine* discourse and feminism. Feminism also requires a re-examination of the divided essences of sex and gender (Booth, 2018). Sex is biologically determined, while gender, related to masculinity and femininity, is socially constructed (Butler, 1990). Feminism in the historical context of the 1960s in the United Kingdom marks a significant transition, recognized primarily as the onset of the second wave of feminism, which emerged in the aftermath of World War II, fueled by broader social and political upheavals of the time. This era was characterized by a resurgence of feminist activism, as women began to challenge ingrained social norms and push for a more equitable status in various societal domains, including politics, employment, and education (Scharff, 2011). Specifically, the feminist movement rallied against patriarchal structures embedded within society, advocating for issues such as reproductive rights, workplace equality, and anti-discrimination legislation (Rowbotham, 1977).

The 1960s were marked by a radical rethinking of gender roles, with many women participating in both organized and grassroots movements (Spandler & Carr, 2020). This collective activism challenged the traditional view of women as primarily wives and mothers in society, instead promoting the idea that women should have the same opportunities and choices as men in all spheres of life.

The Beatles also played the role of cultural leaders, shaping social perspectives towards males and females by positioning the genders in the lyrics of their songs. Specifically, the songs served as vehicles that narrated gendered stories and conveyed feminist ideology advocating gender equality. Their lyrics were discursive performances that contested gender inequality and constructed new understandings of masculinity, femininity and the dynamic interpersonal and power relationships between males and females. Thus, analysing the lyrics of the Beatles' songs can enhance our understanding of how feminist ideology is linguistically constructed and disseminated through the discursive leadership and cultural management of a band that had great influence on their fandom and audience in general. Nevertheless, very little research has systematically examined the lyrics and illustrated how feminism is composed thematically. To address this research gap, this study employs positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1999) and conducts thematic analysis supplemented by corpus linguistic analysis to investigate and elucidate the predominant themes of the Beatles' lyrics (1963–1964) in relation to feminism and Beatlemania, explicating the discursive leadership of the band and the way they managed the cultural meanings of males and females.

Literature review

Discursive leadership

Discursive leadership is grounded in a broadly constructionist ontology (Hacking, 1999) that questions the naturalness and inevitability of leadership as a social phenomenon. Instead of accepting leadership as a self-evident or universally desirable practice, discursive approaches interrogate how

leadership is socially constructed, maintained, and sometimes contested through language and interaction (Shotter, 1993). For example, the concept of “authentic leadership” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) is revealed to be contingent and constructed, as its meanings shift depending on whether authenticity is framed as virtuosity or as the exposure of a leader’s ‘dark side’—demonstrating that the very idea of leadership is subject to competing discourses. Critical theorists further expand the constructionist stance by casting leadership as a mechanism of domination and advocating for more democratic alternatives (Clegg et al., 1996). Discursive leadership, then, is conceived as a practical accomplishment—an outcome of everyday communication and the performative use of language (Sigman, 1992)—rather than as a stable set of traits or functions. Robinson’s (2001) definition encapsulates this processual view: “Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them” (p. 93). This definition underscores leadership as an emergent process of influence and meaning management, distributed among actors and recognized through discourse, rather than a quality inherent to individual leaders (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). The phenomenon of Beatlemania in the 1960s provides a striking example of discursive leadership, as the Beatles became not only musical icons but also influential cultural managers who reshaped societal understandings of masculinity and emotional expression. Through the fervor and collective identification generated by Beatlemania, the band’s lyrics—such as those in *Help!*, *Yesterday*, and *All You Need Is Love*—foregrounded vulnerability, emotional honesty, and affection, challenging traditional stoic models of masculinity. In this way, the Beatles used their cultural platform to enact leadership that constructed new discourses around gender and emotion, illustrating how popular music and its surrounding fandom can collaboratively negotiate and legitimize alternative social identities.

Beatlemania as a case of cultural management

Beatlemania is a cultural movement which highlights the Beatles’ role as cultural leaders managing gender ideologies through positioning males and females

in the lyrics of their songs. Through using lyrics that questioned traditional gender roles with androgynous aesthetics, the band played an important role in reshaping cultural attitudes toward genders. The band blurred the boundary between feminine “pop” (fans) and masculine “rock” (fans) by modelling a less hegemonic masculinity (Warwick, 2007). This was achieved by several mechanisms, including (1) writing inclusive, woman-positive lyrics (Feldman-Barrett, 2021) and (2) being self-aware in how they engaged female listeners (Bradby, 2005). The band's music served as a vehicle for advancing “girl-talk”, which challenged conventional gender roles (Kapurch, 2016). Specifically, the lyrics are composed of themes that deviated from the conventional male-female relationships. The Beatles' music can function to transcend gender norms by allowing women to cultivate and uphold their own values and independence (Feldman-Barrett, 2021, p. 5). For instance, songs like *Please Please Me* and *If I Fell* expressed male vulnerability, contrasting with the stoic masculinity typical for rock and pop music (MacDonald, 2005). These songs offer a new perspective of male image, encouraging audience to rethink gender roles. Moreover, the Beatles' colourful clothing style and long hairstyles with accessories demonstrated a mixture of masculinity and femininity, which was revolutionary for male performers at that time (Womack, 2014). This visual presentation confronted the mainstream notions of masculinity, inspiring young men to explore alternate identities and self-expression (Riley, 2002). Therefore, Beatlemania is often perceived as a form of liberation for women at that time, and can be viewed as a case of cultural management that specifically influenced or challenged the established gender roles in society. The movement is seen as providing a space for young women to express themselves and challenge societal norms (Carr, 2015), and a protest against the sexual repressiveness and rigid double standards of female teen culture (Ehrenreich et al., 2007). The Beatles' music supported advancing women's rights (Rowbotham, 2019). Consequently, females became active participants in rock music, engaging in self-reflection, developing their identities and establishing their communities (Feldman-Barrett, 2021). In other words, Beatlemania is an exemplar that demonstrates the discursive leadership of the Beatles, who played the role of cultural leaders in managing new models of masculinity and femininity

through the lyrics of their songs. The enactment of such discursive leadership is rooted in discourse.

Lyrics, power, inclusion and identity construction

Discourse is an ideal source for the investigation into identity, as it influences and is influenced by socio-cultural contexts (Gee, 2005). Composed of language and language use, discourse is viewed as structured patterns that contribute to transitional and interactional purposes of communication (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). As a result, discourse can reflect socio-cultural values that are embedded by speakers and writers and received and interpreted by readers and listeners. Identity is often represented, negotiated and positioned in discourse. The identity-in-discourse can be explicated by looking into language patterns and elucidated by social structure, practice and politics (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Identity in lyrics is represented in two modes. The first is the reflective mode, through which an individual or group is represented through music that is politically communicated (Street, 2012). For example, marginalized women in the 1960s used music and lyrics as a platform to highlight women's needs and issues of inequality. Thus, lyric can play a "truth-bearing" role, reflecting cultural context as cognitive praxis (Eyerman, 1998). The second is the expressive mode. Echoing social movements, music with lyrics can be a channel for expressing resistance to regimes (Cushman, 1995). One example is protest songs that highlight injustice and mobilise public sentiment to challenge political or social authorities (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). The functions of lyrics influence how audiences perceive the legitimacy of institutional power, particularly in cultural or grassroots movements. In other words, music including songs and sounds can be an instrument to challenge the dominant ideological and political system, while people make use of it to construct or transform individual and collective identity (Adorno, 2002). Thus, lyrics are one of the ideal discourses that can contest gender norms and challenge patriarchal structures through discursive leadership of performers, particularly those who are popular and influential in society.

Prior text studies recognize the relationship between the Beatles' lyrics and feminism, as their music conveys perspectives that resonate with feminist themes

(Warwick, 2007). This connection reflects the tension between the entrenched patriarchy of their era and the rising status of women, as the Beatles' works often critique traditional social norms that perpetuated patriarchal values in the 1960s. For instance, Kapurch (2016) analyses the modes of lyrical expression through a comprehensive descriptive approach to several songs, including *Misery* (1963), *Ask Me Why* (1963), and *Boys* (1960 & 1963). Themes such as teenage femininity, androgynous features of romance, and powerlessness are represented in the lyric discourse (Stark, 2005). It is argued that the lyrics of the Beatles' songs reflect a shift from female dependence to male vulnerability (Gould, 2007). For example, the song *She Loves You*, emphasizes the Beatles' leading role in fostering belief in female love and articulating female longings that extend beyond marital expectations to include fun and carefree dating (Warwick, 2007). Love relationships and romance are prevalent themes in their lyrics, with high frequencies of third-person pronouns such as "she" and "her", underscoring the significant role of women in the band's lyrics and capturing the attention of discourse analysts (Petrie et al., 2008).

Nonetheless, these studies have limitations, as they do not effectively reflect the full picture of how the Beatles' music engages with feminist themes due to their focus on specific lyrics and a limited dataset. Consequently, the underlying meanings that explicate the power dynamics and gender roles in the Beatles' music remain underexplored. More importantly, the role of the Beatles in the Beatlemania movement, and how their leadership is discursively constructed and performed through the cultural management in the lyrics have yet been explicated. To address this gap, this study analyses the lyrics of the Beatles songs to elucidate how the cultural management of the band discursively shaped and manifested their leadership in relation to gender ideologies, especially masculinity and feminism in the 1960s. This study addresses the research questions:

- A) How are male and female identities represented, positioned and managed in the lyrics of the Beatles' songs (1963–1964)?
- B) How can the discursive leadership of the Beatles be manifested and construed in their cultural management and positioning of gender?

Theoretical framework: Positioning theory, narrative and lyrics

This study utilizes positioning theory to examine how the Beatles made use of feminism-related lyrics to position males, particularly in romantic relationships. According to positioning theory, an individual's identity emerges through social interaction and is continually (re)constructed through discursive practices and narratives (Davies & Harré, 1999). Instead of adopting the conventional notions of 'identity' or 'role', which are often seen as rigid, formal and ritualistic, positioning theory focuses on the dynamic, fluid, and negotiable aspects of face-to-face interactions by using the concept of 'position'. A position encompasses both how an individual wish to be perceived by others and the perspective from which they view the world (Ceuterick & Vandebroek, 2017). Furthermore, all positions are relational, meaning that while an individual position themselves in a particular way within a social interaction, other participants are simultaneously positioned relative to that individual (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). Consequently, positioning can lead to instrumental or task-oriented negotiations. To examine the positioning of individuals or groups, it is crucial to have a grasp of the implicit rules that generate meanings within a situational event, which can be considered as the background, setting, or context (Berger, 1986). Analysing how individuals display their alignment, set, stance, posture, or projected self to themselves and others helps enhance the understanding of the event (Goffman, 1986). An individual's position can be interpreted through their interpretative repertoire, which refers to the patterned and recognizable routine of descriptions, arguments, and evaluations that are distinguished by recurrent themes, metaphors, and characterizations (Wetherell, 1998). Despite its nature as written discourse, lyrics function as an ideological and epistemological carrier, allowing performers to convey meanings that position the participants in lyric narratives. In other words, the positioning that occurs in lyrics can be realized through investigating the predominant themes that reflect the power dynamics between males and females. To reveal how the Beatles position males in relation to females in romantic relationships, this study employs thematic analysis and corpus-assisted discourse analysis, focusing on feminism-related

content and linguistic items signaled by interpersonal relationship, such as the meanings associated with first-person and second-person pronouns, and the lexical items that indicate values, beliefs and relationship status.

Narratives can be “temporal (reflecting on the past and looking to the future), emotive (positive and negative experiences and surprises), reflective (beliefs, expectations, and practices), and instructive (advice)” (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 38), involving a wide-range content about subject positions, lives, cultures and feelings (Yip, 2020). Positioning theory can be one of the conceptual and analytical tools for the investigation of narratives, as it “foregrounds the ways narrators carry out various actions by attributing certain positions to characters in their stories, to the audience of their storytelling, to themselves, and in respect to the cultural world at large” (Brockmeier, 2012, p. 10). Harré et al. (2009) contend that “if we take the view that life unfolds as a narrative, with multiple, contemporaneous interlinking storylines, the significance of the actions that people carry out, including speech acts, is partly determined by the then-and-there positions of the actors” (p. 8). The authors agree with Harré et al. (2009) as they further explain that “what the dominant story line of a narrative is can be determined by the local assignments of rights and duties. As positioned, the act-forces of a person’s speaking and acting are given this or that meaning and consequently play this or that role in a story” (p. 12).

Lyrics are often viewed as narratives, given their narrative structures and storytelling elements embedded within lyrical expressions. Research indicates that song lyrics function not merely as vehicles for personal emotion, but also as narratives that share experiences, illustrating the broad spectrum of emotions through structured storytelling techniques. For instance, Alberhasky and Durkee (2024) emphasize that the “Arc of Narrative” in songs varies considerably by genre, suggesting a distinct narrative presence that resonates with listeners across different musical styles. This genre-dependent narrative quality highlights the significance of context in interpreting lyrical content. Another example is Blessing (2024) who analysed Bob Marley’s *Redemption Song* and demonstrated how lyrical narratives embed personal experiences, effectively weaving together themes and emotions that resonate with narrative depth. Thus, it is evident that lyricism frequently operates within a narrative

framework, enriching artistic expression by marrying personal emotions with storytelling. In this study, the lyrics of the Beatles' songs are perceived as narratives that allow the exploration of discursive positioning of males and females in romantic relationships. Although analysing lyrics in isolation can be incomplete or misleading if broader contexts—such as literary and poetic traditions, the development of popular music, and prevailing gender norms—are not taken into account, it is notable that the Beatles frequently drew upon familiar tropes and conventions. However, as cultural leaders, they addressed these elements in ways that strategically appealed to female fans and acknowledged male vulnerability. Rather than claiming that the Beatles were revolutionary in their portrayal of gender roles through lyrics, this study examines how their lyrics operate as narratives and discursive practices that both reflect and subtly shape the discursive positioning of men and women within romantic relationships. This perspective enriches our understanding of lyrics of popular music as sites where perceptions on gender are negotiated through discursive leadership.

Methodology

The collected lyrics were from the Beatles albums released in the U.K. and the U.S.A. Table 1 shows the albums included in the analysis.

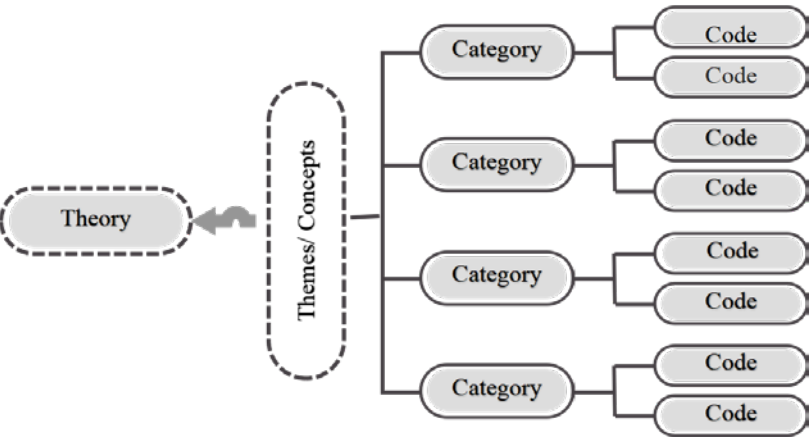
Table 1. Albums of the Beatles Released in the U.K. & U.S.A. from 1963 to 1964

Albums released in the U.K. (4)		Albums released in the U.S. (4)	
Please Please Me	1963	Meet the Beatles	1964
With the Beatles	1963	The Beatles' Second album	1964
A Hard Day's Night	1964	A Hard Day's Night	1964
Beatles for Sale	1964	Beatles' 65 #	1964

The lyrics were collected mainly from the internet, and manual transcriptions of the songs were conducted to compile a specialized corpus of the Beatles' lyrics. The corpus contains 68 songs, comprising 8532 words. The corpus compiled for this study is modest in size; however, this smaller size allowed us to conduct both quantitative and in-depth qualitative analyses, as smaller corpora are better suited for genre-specific investigations (Handford, 2010).

Both thematic analysis and corpus linguistic analysis were conducted to reveal the predominant themes of the lyrics and examine the relationship of the classified themes with feminism by considering patterns and semantic meanings of the most frequently occurring lexical items. Thematic analysis involves the analytical examination of texts by breaking them into relatively small units for subsequent descriptive treatment (Sparker, 2005) and involve systematic coding which creates categories and code-groups leading to higher orders to generate a theme (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Thematic analysis goes beyond to explore explicit and implicit meanings within data sets (Guest et al., 2012), allowing us to holistically accommodate parties' lived experiences, perspectives, practices, social norms, and processes that contextually shape particular phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, the data set was examined from social, historical and cultural aspects in relation to the emergence of Beatlemania and feminism. The coding method of thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to investigate the phenomena of texts in various forms, such as words (lyrics), photographs, audio, video, and so on (Saldana, 2009). This method can reveal the underlying replicable and systemic patterns (Bryman, 2011). The analysing process involves circular and systematic reading and observation by assigning labels (codes) to the content of texts, which are then divided into several parts systemically and categorized into themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The underlying phenomena related to these themes can be identified and explained. The code-to-theme processing involves conceptual, contextual and relational reflections on the reality of the world's happenings, such as feminism in women's movements (Berg & Latin, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Saldana's (2009) coding instructions were employed. The specific process of coding is as follows:

Figure 1. Codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry (Saldana, 2009: 11–13)



As shown in Figure 1, coding begins with scatters of codes, which are often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a salient, summative and related attribute to a portion of text (Saldana, 2009). These codes are then categorized and grouped into categories with specific properties which the coder judges to be distinct from the properties of other classes (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). This process aims to “represent both the interrelations among words and their classification into meaning categories” (Roberts, 1989). In other words, it refers to grouping the codes into categories that share similar topics or salient features. The lyrics of a song in the data set were separated into three verses. The question of whether each verse can have more than one code is controversial. However, given that the same verse can sometimes contain more than one meaningful content, the analysts were allowed to label a verse with more than one code. Indeed, splitting the textual data into smaller codable units can enhance the scrutiny of data analysis (Saldana, 2009).

In addition to thematic analysis, this study also employed corpus linguistics as a supplementary analysis to uncover predominant semantic meanings of the lyrics of the Beatles’ songs. Corpus linguistics encompasses various methods for analysing linguistic patterns in collections of digitized, naturally occurring language (Cheng, 2012), utilizing specialized corpus analysis tools. This approach complements qualitative thematic analysis by providing both qualitative and

quantitative insights, enhancing the reliability of theme identification. Two corpus linguistics techniques were employed: keyword analysis and concordance analysis, each yielding quantitative results supported by examples. A keyword is defined as a word that occurs significantly more frequently in one corpus than in another (Hunston, 2002). Keywords serve as ‘signposts’ to discourses (Baker, 2006), reflecting the most distinctive language forms in the corpus. Generating a keyword list for a specialized corpus requires a large general reference corpus for comparison (Cheng, 2012), and the British National Corpus was used as the reference for the Beatles’ lyrics corpus. Keywords were identified using log-likelihood calculations (Dunning, 1993), a confidence measure that assesses the likelihood that a keyword is genuinely significant rather than a result of sampling error (Brookes & Baker, 2021, p. 366). Table 2 shows the generated top-ten keywords of the corpus.

Table 2. Keywords of the Beatles’ lyrics (1963–1964)

Rank	Keyword	Keyness (Likelihood)
1	I	1933.396
2	you	1627.948
3	me	857.848
4	't (not)	550.977
5	love	541.641
6	my	375.2
7	'll (will)	334.783
8	don't	279.119
9	she	274.325
10	baby	261.756

The present study focuses on the positioning of males and females and the power dynamics between the genders. Adopting corpus linguistics as a complement to thematic analysis, the study examines the keywords which are pronouns signalling interpersonal meanings, including ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘me’,

‘my’ and ‘she’. Subsequently, concordance analysis of the pronouns was conducted. The researchers iteratively reviewed the concordance lines to critically analyse and interpret recurring semantic patterns, generalising the predominant meanings in the lyrics. Finally, the results of the thematic analysis and corpus linguistic analysis will be compared and contrasted. Logically speaking, the two sets of results should be thematically consistent and complementary to one another, as both of the analyses focus on the thematic aspects of the data. Combining these analytical methods allows researchers to identify the predominant themes in discourse with high accuracy and reliability through both quantitative and qualitative analysis. With the identified themes and their specific meanings, this study employs positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1999) to discuss the power dynamics between males and females and elucidate how the Beatles, representing males, locate themselves in relation to females through the lyrics.

Findings

A total of 409 codes were generated from the analysis of 68 songs. The categorization process yielded results indicating that 81% (331) of the categorized codes fall under the overarching theme of power dynamics between males and females in romantic relationships. Specifically, three predominant themes of positioning were identified, including positioning as a struggling man, positioning as a scarifier, and positioning as an equal person. The following sections offer details about the themes with support from excerpts and concordance examples.

Positioning as a struggling man

This theme of positioning illustrates the negative states and emotions of males, portraying them as struggling men. Specifically, the content relates to their inferiority and vulnerability in relationships with females and the emotions they experience in these relationships. The males’ sentimental suffering is attributed to the overwhelming pressures exerted by women, placing them in dilemmas.

However, the males are aware of their suffering yet choose to endure it. Excerpts 1 to 3 exemplify the meanings associated with this category:

Excerpt 1

*I've lost her now for sure
I won't see her no more
It's gonna be a drag ... **Misery**
(Song: Misery)*

Excerpt 2

*I **do all the pleasing with you**, it's so
hard to reason
With you, whoah yeah, why do you
make me blue
(Song: Please Please Me)*

Excerpt 3

*I know **I'll never be the same**
If I don't get her back again
Because I know she'll always be
The only girl for me
(Song: Don't Bother Me)*

These excerpts illustrate how males are positioned as inferior in their romantic relationships. For instance, males refer to females as *misery* after discontending them (see Excerpt 1); and though males *do all the pleasing with* females, females still *make* them *blue* (see Excerpt 2). A dynamic where men feel subjugated is highlighted. This portrayal not only reflects their emotional struggles but also underscores the shifting power dynamics in relationships, aligning with feminist themes that challenge traditional notions of male dominance and explore the emotional complexities faced by men in a changing social landscape. In these lyrics, men are not depicted as strong providers in a relationship or family as expected; instead, they are positioned as struggling

men with emotions. Perceptions on gender roles can be constructed and reinforced through media portrayal, including popular music (Jerome, 2013). In this way, the Beatles were cultural icons who served as leaders for their audience, if not followers, in constructing new understandings of masculinity that contributed to the feminist discourse. Such management of meaning was important in the construction of new ideas of gender roles, as it could challenge stereotypes of male superiority and the association between emotional restraint and masculinity. The band implicitly suggested that both men and women could equally experience and express their struggles in relationships. Moreover, the corpus analysis of the keyword 'I' also indicates this positioning and identity of males in the lyrics. The following concordances of the keyword "I" provide more details.

- 1) I'm a loser I'm a loser / And I'm not what I appear to be.
- 2) I'm so happy when you dance with me
- 3) Baby's in black and I'm feeling blue / Tell me, oh what can I do?
- 4) I'm sure of I will love her forever
- 5) You know if you break my heart I'll go / But I'll be back again.

The concordances seem to represent "I" as the male who is insistent about his love for the females. This is evident in concordances 2) and 4). This steadfast love compels the male to return, even after experiencing heart-breaking events in the relationship, as shown in concordance 5). The "I" portrayed in the lyrics tends to be negative, sometimes depicted as a loser, and as a sad and lost person. Thus, the first-person male, represented by the Beatles, is positioned as a man struggling to handle their relationship with women confidently. Through these lyrics, the Beatles were engaged with changing public attitudes about gender roles and norms that were in line with feminist ideas. Their widespread popularity enabled them to perform the discursive practices, through lyrics, of demonstrating vulnerability in relationships and redefining the meaning of masculinity, which in turned contributed to not only their success and popularity especially among female audiences, but also the development of the second wave of feminism starting in the early 1960s (Gould, 2007).

Positioning as a sacrificer

Related to the previously illustrated theme of positioning, males are meanwhile positioned as sacrificers in the lyrics. This positioning indicates a rising status of women from the male perspective, highlighting the importance of females from the male perspective. In the positioning, the contents are associated with male actions, beliefs, needs, and appreciation for females. Excerpts 6 and 7 illustrate the superiority of females in these dynamics:

- ⋮ Excerpt 6
- ⋮ *You, if you break my heart I'll go*
- ⋮ *But **I'll be back again***
- ⋮ (Song: *I'll Be Back*)
- ⋮
- ⋮ Excerpt 7
- ⋮ *Anna*
- ⋮ *You come and ask me, girl*
- ⋮ ***To set you free**, girl*
- ⋮ ***You say he loves you more than me***
- ⋮ *So, I'll set you free*
- ⋮ *Go with him (Anna)*
- ⋮ *Go with him (Anna)*
- ⋮ (Song: *Anna*)

These excerpts demonstrate how the superior position of females is constructed in romantic relationships. For example, in Excerpt 7, the male willingly lets the female go when she falls in love with someone else, highlighting his emphasis on her happiness and his readiness to sacrifice for her sake. This dynamic illustrates the recognition of women's agency and autonomy, which aligns closely with feminist ideals that advocate for women's empowerment and challenge traditional power hierarchies. It is essential to recognize that feminism is discursively constructed through the interplay of the positionings between males and females, reflecting a multifaceted understanding of power dynamics

among the genders. In addition to the thematic analysis, this positioning can also be realised in the concordances of the keyword “me”.

- 6) You really got a hold on **me**.
- 7) Since you left **me**, I'm so alone.
- 8) Won't you dance with **me**? I am so sad and lonely.
- 9) Tell **me** that you love **me** baby.
- 10) You know you made **me** cry.

The concordances of the object pronoun “me” illustrate the male’s suffering in the relationship, such as being left alone, refused, and hurt. Despite these hurtful experiences, the male still deeply desires the love of the female and remains eager to give love to the female. The concordances containing the keyword “my” also indicate a similar spirit of the male in a relationship.

- 11) I give her all **my** love.
- 12) If I give **my** heart to you, I must be sure.
- 13) Well, I beg you on **my** bended knees.
- 14) You could find better things to do than to break **my** heart again.

As shown above, the possessive pronoun “my” is often used to describe the male’s love and heart for the female. However, this keyword seems to convey a negative meaning, suggesting that “my love” is not cherished and “my heart” is broken by the female. Moreover, the second-person pronoun “you”, which often refers to the female in a relationship, tends to be used to express the male’s love. Similar to the previous keywords, this one also indicates the male’s struggles, such as the desire to be loved, the sadness of being lied to, and the anxiety of being left.

- 15) Now I know that **you** won't leave me no more.
- 16) I'll send all my love to **you**.
- 17) Tell me that **you** love me baby.
- 18) Why **you** lie to me.

The keyword that directly portrays the image of the female appears to be “she”. Concordances of this keyword are as follows:

- 19) **She**'s got the devil in her heart.
- 20) Though tonight **she**'s made me sad I still love her.
- 21) I'm happy just to know that **she** loves me.
- 22) I think of her but **she** thinks of him.

As shown in concordances 19) to 22), the female seems to be portrayed negatively, depicted as having a devilish mind, potentially thinking of another male and causing the male sadness. Despite these hurtful behaviours, the male still loves her and yearns for her affection, sacrificing himself and his love. While such portrayals might contribute to the stigmatization of females being the ‘bad’ party in a relationship, the male is positioned as a scarificer in the relationship. In this way, traditional power dynamics are challenged: males are positioned as voluntary sacrificers for females, which contracts with conventional expectations that females should sacrifice for males by taking on the familial responsibilities such as child-rearing, maintaining the household and providing emotional support to the male partner (Bruley, 2016). These lyrics by the Beatles, who actively shaped the narrative around and managing the cultural meaning of men's love for women, demonstrated the band's role in (re)defining the gender identities of both men and women.

Positioning an equal person

Despite the struggle and sacrifice of the males, the lyrics also signal the male's desire for equal status in the relationship. This theme, which is the least frequent compared with the other two predominant themes, emphasizes equality in romantic relationships. Sample lyrics include:

- Excerpt 4
- *Whenever I want you around, yeah*
- *All I gotta do is call you on the*
- *phone*

.....
***And the same goes for me,** whenever
 you want me at all*

.....
 (Song: *All I've Got to Do*)

Excerpt 5
You know it's up to you
I think it's only fair
Pride can hurt you too
Apologize to her
 (Song: *She Loves You*)

The words such as *same* and *fair* that are revealed in the thematic analysis underscore the desire for equitable relationships between males and females. This category connects to the theme of feminism as it reflects a growing awareness of the need for balance and mutual respect in romantic partnerships. More specifically, feminism in the 1960s indicates females' resistance to conservative social norms and desire for having the same rights, opportunities and choices as males have in society (Spandler & Carr, 2020). The keywords *same* and *fair* literally manifest the feminists' emphasis in the era. By advocating for fairness and reciprocity in romantic relationships, these lyrics align with feminist ideals that seek to dismantle traditional gender roles and promote equality, highlighting the importance of both partners' contributions to a healthy relationship. In other words, the Beatles made use of love stories and intimate relationships as tropes to strategically present a social fair status between males and females, advocating gender equality in love relationship between men and women, as well as the broader society (Eagly et al., 2009). This theme of positioning is not evidenced in the corpus analysis, apparently due to its statistical infrequency in the corpus.

Discussion

Drawing upon positioning theory (Harré et al., 2009), this study conducts thematic analysis supplemented by corpus linguistic analysis to reveal the predominant themes of positioning between males and females in the lyrics of Beatles songs released between 1963 and 1964. The mixed-methods analysis shows that 81% of the identified themes are related to three main positionings: a struggling man, a sacrificer, and an equal person in the relationship. Among these, the positioning of sacrificer is the most prevalent. In the positioning of a struggling man, the lyrics reveal men grappling with their negative states, influenced by societal expectations and pressures within their relationships. These men are portrayed as enduring various forms of emotional distress, reflecting a broader critique of the association between masculinity and the suppression of vulnerability. This positioning does not simply depict men as inferior; rather, it highlights the complexities of their emotional experiences in a changing cultural landscape. By acknowledging male struggles, the Beatles challenged the stereotype of the stoic male and open a dialogue about the emotional toll of romantic relationships. Through their lyrics, the Beatles used language to resist existing gender hierarchies and to question conventional ideals of masculinity. By shaping lyric narratives in their songs, they set an example for a different model of masculinity and for men's emotional expression in relationships with their female partners.

The positioning of scarifier emerges as the most prominent theme. The lyrics appear to celebrate women's agency, emphasizing their importance and the respect they command from men. This recognition of female empowerment and male sacrifice not only challenges traditional power hierarchies but also aligns with feminist advocacy for women's rights and autonomy. The willingness of males—represented by the popular band and cultural leaders, the Beatles—to make sacrifices and prioritize the happiness of women, as demonstrated in the excerpts, reflects an acknowledgment of female agency. This further reinforced the discursive leadership potential of these narratives to shape cultural conversations in the context of the 1960s, a period when feminism was gaining momentum in advocating for equality between men and women. This positioning is supported by the findings of the corpus linguistic analysis,

which reveals that the keywords in the lyrics mostly pertain to the male's expression of determined love, belief and loyalty to the females, as well as the desire for the female's love. On the other hand, the female is portrayed as the person who often disappoints the male. The representation of males and females in the lyrics displays categorical opposites, including faith versus hope and harsh social criticism versus morose personal confession (Schneider, 2016). Lastly, despite being the least prevalent among the identified themes of positioning, the positioning of an equal person underscores the male's desire for balance and mutual respect in romantic partnerships. The emphasis on fairness and reciprocity in these lyrics aligns with feminist ideals that advocate for dismantling traditional gender roles. By promoting equitable dynamics, the Beatles contributed to a discourse that recognized the importance of both partners in fostering healthy relationships, suggesting a progressive view of gender interactions. The way the Beatles positioned gender in the lyrics of their songs from 1963 to 1964 analysed in this study demonstrates the band's discursive leadership during the early 1960s, a period that marked the emergence of the second wave of feminism.

Language matters in symbolic management. Drawing upon discourse theory (Fairclough, 2003), this study highlights the crucial role of lyric language in negotiating and constructing gender perceptions. Language users adopt distinct language and speech patterns to (re)construct identities to achieve transitional and interactional purposes (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Fairclough, 2003) because certain linguistic characteristics may be associated with different identities (Yip & Kong, 2025). Discourse is an important form of social practice that reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations (Fairclough, 1992). According to the results of corpus linguistic analyses, this study illuminates the use of first-person and second-person pronouns in the lyrics to represent the unequal relationship between males and females through narratives. For instance, in positioning as a struggling man, the lyrics contain a profound number of first-person pronouns 'I' along content words that signal emotions and roles of males in the narrative, such as 'blue', 'loser' and 'happy'. The positioning as sacrificer shows the frequent use of both first- and second-person pronouns to depict what and how the males sacrifice

to love the females. These language patterns contribute to the composition of the identified feminist themes and the construction of gender identity.

The findings in this study indicate a relational complexity in the portrayal of gender dynamics, aligning with positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1999). As cultural leaders, the Beatles demonstrated discursive leadership through lyrics that set examples for a previously unacknowledged spectrum of male experiences, including struggles and vulnerabilities, which serve to illuminate the emotional landscapes of men in romantic contexts. According to positioning theory, all positions are relational, meaning that while individuals position themselves in a particular way within a social interaction, other participants are simultaneously positioned relative to that individual (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). The portrayal of feminism within these songs is discursively constructed through male expressions of tolerance, sacrifice, and suffering in their romantic relationships with women. The Beatles articulated male feelings and desires towards females through their lyrics, revealing the power dynamics at play between genders. Within this lyrical framework, males are depicted as individuals willing to endure suffering, anxiety, depression, frustration, insecurity, and even grief as a result of female actions and words. Despite their emotional turmoil, these males often accept their roles as being manipulated by females, leading to feelings of self-doubt, low self-esteem, and a sense of loss within the relationship. In contrast, females are positioned in a dominant role, receiving love, trust, appreciation, and a sense of necessity from males. Males tend to cherish females and frequently overlook or tolerate their misbehaviours.

While the findings do not explicitly advocate for core feminist values such as gender equality or women's rights, the Beatles' lyrics implicitly challenged the power dynamics between males and females by constructing a more nuanced and progressive image of females. This positioning may have contributed to raising awareness of female self-actualization and the critique of gender norms, aligning with Millard's (2012) assertion that the Beatles made the changing status of women felt worldwide. The positioning between males and females in the Beatles' lyrics, through which discursive practices construct perceptions of gender, not only reflects the complexities of gender dynamics, but also contributes to a broader cultural dialogue about masculinity, femininity,

and the evolving roles of males and females in society. In this case, the Beatles were cultural leaders in the management of meaning (Fairhurst, 2011). This study does not only offer insights into how popular music can both reflect and influence societal attitudes toward gender and gender positioning, it also argues that the leadership of the Beatles in feminist discourse potentially contributed to the emergence of Beatlemania, in which the Beatles negotiated and managed the meanings of males and females. The male-female positioning in the lyrics conveys a sense of the rising status of women in Britain and the US (O'Toole, 2016). One of the salient characteristics of Beatlemania is the conflict between good and evil or the powerless and the powerful (Kapurch, 2016). The findings reveal that the female is portrayed as someone who makes the male feel down and relatively powerful with the empowerment of the male in the relationship. The male, on the other hand, is depicted as good and powerless. Through discursive positioning of males and females in intimate relationships, the Beatles were cultural leaders using lyrics in their songs to forge evolving understandings of masculinity and feminism.

The identified themes of the lyrics—the three main positionings of a struggling man, a sacrificer, and an equal person in the relationship—are in line with the feminist advocate of gender equality. Weaving these themes into their songs, the Beatles not only resonated with the changing social perceptions on gender, especially the growing demand for equality between men and women by feminists, but also helped cultivate their devoted female fanbase, leading to Beatlemania. Through expressions vulnerability, struggles, and a willingness to sacrifice for love in their lyrics, the Beatles crafted male personas that contrasted sharply with the traditional, stoic ideals of masculinity. This recasting of male vulnerability made their songs more relatable and emotionally accessible to female listeners, who could identify with the complexities of romantic relationships depicted in the lyrics, rather than with the traditional authoritative male figure. The band's empathetic portrayal of male emotionality fostered a sense of intimacy and connection with their audience, particularly young women navigating their own changing roles and aspirations during the early 1960s. In doing so, the Beatles not only broadened the scope of acceptable male expression, but also created a cultural platform where female fans' enthusiastic

responses reinforced and encouraged further explorations of gender and emotion in their music. Further studies on the Beatles' songs in later years and their fandom will be beneficial to the understanding of such "charismatic leadership" of the Beatles, which "must be viewed as an attribution made by followers" (Conger & Kanungo, 1998, p. 48). Nevertheless, this study shows that the interplay between lyrical content and audience reception, exemplified by the cultural phenomenon Beatlemania, underscores the Beatles' unique role in discursive leadership and their ability to both reflect and shape contemporary understandings of gender, solidifying their impact as cultural leaders during a pivotal era of social transformation.

Conclusion

Employing positioning theory, this study combines thematic analysis supplemented by corpus linguistic analysis to examine lyrics of 68 songs by the Beatles released between 1963 and 1964, discussing power dynamics and interpersonal discrepancies between males and females. Illuminating the emergence of Beatlemania as a case of cultural management, this study reveals how the Beatles played the leading role to discursively shape and change the conventional perceptions of women in the 1960s through utilizing the lyric with feminist's contents in their performance. This is one of the few studies that sheds light on the thematic aspects of the Beatles' music and its association with feminism. It is argued that the identified predominant themes of positioning highlight the unequal relationship between males and females in romantic contexts. The positioning of females challenges conventional views of gender and sexuality by contradicting the traditional statuses of males and females. The Beatles' songs might have played a key role in raising awareness among females regarding self-actualization, a sense of female superiority, and female liberation, due to the feminist content of the lyrics and the band's popularization in the 1960s. In other words, the band displayed the role of cultural leaders who managed former cultural ideology of genders through locating males and females at unequal positions in romantic relationships. This study also highlights

the relationship between language and cultural management. Language can be an instrument that enables cultural actors to negotiate and manage cultural perceptions through the use of linguistic patterns and discursive discourse strategies.

References

Adorno, T. W. (2002). *Essays on Music*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Alberhasky, M., & Durkee, P. (2024). Songs tell a story: The arc of narrative for music. *PLOS One*, 19(5), e0303188.

Alvesson, M., & Sveningsson, S. (2003). The great disappearing act: Difficulties in doing “leadership”. *Leadership Quarterly*, 14(3), 359–381.

Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 315–338.

Baker, P. (2006). *Using corpora in discourse analysis*. Continuum.

Barkhuizen, G., Benson, P., & Chik, A. (2014). *Narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research*. Routledge.

Berg, K. E., & Latin, R. W. (2008). *Essentials of research methods in health, physical education, exercise science, and recreation*. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

Berger, B. M. (1986). Foreword. In E. Goffman (Ed.), *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience* (pp. xi–xviii). Northeastern University Press.

Blessing, K. (2024). Analysis of the experiential metafunction in the lyrics of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song". *International Journal of Literature Language and Linguistics*, 7(2), 59–67.

Booth, A. (2018). Feminism. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 46(3–4), 691–697.

Bradby, B. (2005). She told me what to say: The Beatles and girl-group discourse. *Popular Music & Society*, 28(3), 359–390.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage.

Brockmeier, J. (2012). Narrative scenarios: Toward a culturally thick notion of narrative. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *Oxford library of psychology. The Oxford handbook of culture and psychology* (pp. 439–467). Oxford University Press.

Brookes, G., & Baker, P. (2021). Fear and responsibility: Discourses of obesity and risk in the UK press. *Journal of Risk Research*, 25(3), 363–378.

Bruley, S. (2016). *Women in Britain since 1900*. Macmillan.

Bryman, A. (2011). *Business research methods* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Bucholtz, M., & K. Hall (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach, *Discourse Studies*, 7(4–5), 585–614.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Carr, N. (2015). Why those screaming Beatlemania girls matter. *Hey Dullblog*. Retrieved from <https://www.heydullblog.com/books/why-those-screaming-beatlemania-girls-matter/>. Accessed 26 November 2025.

Ceuterich, M., & Vandebroek, I. (2017). Identity in a medicine cabinet: Discursive positions of Andean migrants towards their use of herbal remedies in the United Kingdom. *Social Science & Medicine*, 177, 43–51.

Cheng, W. (2012). *Exploring corpus linguistics: Language in action*. Routledge.

Clegg, S. R., Hardy, C., & Nord, W. R. (Eds.) (1996). *Handbook of organization studies*. Sage.

Conger, J. A., & Kanungo, R. N. (1998). *Charismatic leadership in organizations*. SAGE Publications, Incorporated.

Cura, K. (2009). She loves you: The Beatles and female fanaticism. *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*, 2(1), 104–113.

Cushman, T. (1995). *Notes from underground: Rock music counterculture in Russia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1999). Positioning and personhood. In R. Harré & L. Van Langenhoven (Eds.), *Positioning theory: Moral contexts of intentional action* (pp. 32–52). Wiley-Blackwell.

Deboich, S. L. (2017). Elvis, Cliff and the birth of British rock and roll. *The New European*. Retrieved from <https://www.thenewworld.co.uk/brexit-news-elvis-cliff-british-rock-21230/>. Accessed 2 December 2025.

Driver, R. D. (2007). *The Beatles image: Mass marketing 1960s British and American music and culture, or being a short thesis on the dubious package of the Beatles* [Master's thesis]. Texas Tech University.

Dunning, T. (1993). Accurate methods for the statistics of surprise and coincidence. *Computational Linguistics*, 19(1), 61–74.

Eagly, A. H., Eastwick, P. W., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C. (2009). Possible selves in marital roles: the impact of the anticipated division of labor on the mate preferences of women and men. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35(4), 403–414.

Ehrenreich, B., Hess, E., & Jacobs, G. (2007). Beatlemania: Girls just want to have fun. In L.A. Lewis (Ed.), *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media* (pp. 84–106). Rowan and Littlefield.

Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62, 107–115.

Erlingsson, C., & Brysiewicz, P. (2017). A hands-on guide to doing content analysis. *African Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 7, 93–99.

Eyerman, R. (1998). *Music and social movements*. Cambridge University Press.

Eyerman, R., & Jamison, A. (1998). *Music and social movements: Mobilizing traditions in the twentieth century*. Cambridge University Press.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.

Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis: Discourse as social interaction. In T. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction* (Vol. 2, pp. 258–284). Sage.

Fairhurst, G. T. (2011). The power of framing: Creating the language of leadership. Jossey-Bass.

Feldman-Barrett, C. (2021). *A women's history of the Beatles*. Bloomsbury.

Frith, S. (1984). Rock and politics of memory. *Social Text*, 9/10, 59–69.

Gee, J. P. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis. Theory and method* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Goffman, E. (1986). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Northeastern University Press.

Gould, J. (2007). *Can't buy me love: The Beatles, Britain and America*. Three Rivers Press.

Guest, G., MacQueen, K., & Namey, E. (2012). *Applied thematic analysis*. SAGE Publications.

Hacking, I. (1999). *The social construction of what?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Handford, M. (2010). What can a corpus tell us about specialist genres? In A. O'Keeffe & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of corpus linguistics* (pp. 255–269). Routledge.

Harré, R., & Moghaddam, F. (Eds.) (2003). *The self and others: Positioning individual and groups in personal, political and cultural contexts*. Praeger Publishers.

Harré, R., Moghaddam, F. M., Cairnie, T. P., Rothbart, D., & Sabat, S. R. (2009). Recent advances in positioning theory. *Theory & Psychology*, 19(1), 5–31.

Hasted, N. (2017). *You really got me: The story of The Kinks*. Omnibus Press.

Hunston, S. (2002). *Corpora in applied linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.

Jerome, C. (2013). Gender messages in contemporary popular malay songs. *Issues in Language Studies*, 2(1).

Kapurch, K. (2016). Crying, waiting, hoping: The Beatles, girl culture, and the melodramatic mode. In K. Womack & K. B. Kapurch (Eds.), *New critical perspectives on the Beatles: Things we said today* (pp. 199–220). Palgrave Macmillan.

Lengermann, P., & Niebrugge, G. (2010). Feminism. In G. Ritzer & J.M. Ryan (Eds.), *The concise encyclopedia of sociology*. John Wiley & Sons.

MacDonald, I. (2005). *Revolution in the head: The Beatles' records and the sixties*. Pimlico.

Millard, A. (2012). *Beatlemania: Technology, business, and teen culture in cold war America*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Mohapatra, A. K. (2009). Theory of feminism and tribal women: An empirical study of Koraput. *Mens Sana Monographs*, 7(1), 80–92.

O'Toole, K. (2016). She said she said: How women have transformed from fans to authors in Beatles' history. In K. Womack & K.B. Kapurch (Eds.), *New critical perspectives on the Beatles: Things we said today* (pp. 179–198). Palgrave Macmillan.

Petrie, K. J., Pennebaker, J. W., & Sivertsen, B. (2008). Things we said today: A linguistic analysis of the Beatles. *Psychology of Aesthetic, Creativity, and the Arts*, 2(4), 197–202.

Riley, T. (2002). *Lennon: The man, the myth, the music – The definitive life*. Hyperion.

Roberts, C. W. (1989). Other than counting words: A linguistic approach to content analysis. *Social Forces*, 68(1), 147–177.

Robinson, V. M. J. (2001). Embedding leadership in task performance. In K. Wong & C. W. Evers (Eds.), *Leadership for quality schooling* (pp. 90–102). Routledge.

Rowbotham, S. (1977). *Women, resistance and revolution: A history of women and revolution in the modern world*. Allen Lane.

Rowbotham, S. (2019). *Promise of a dream: Remembering the Sixties*. Verso.

Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Scharff, C. (2011). ‘It is a colour thing and a status thing, rather than a gender thing’: negotiating difference in talk about feminism. *Feminism & Psychology*, 21(4), 458–476.

Schildt, A., & Siegfried, D. (2006). Introduction: Youth, Consumption, and Politics in the Age of Radical Change. In A. Schildt & D. Siegfried (Eds.), *Between Marx and Coca-Cola: Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies, 1960–1980* (1st ed., pp. 1–36). Berghahn Books.

Schneider, M. (2016). Getting better: The Beatles and the angry young men. In K. Womack & K.B. Kapurch (Eds.), *New critical perspectives on the Beatles: Things we said today* (pp. 13–30). Palgrave Macmillan.

Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities: Constructing life through language*. Sage.

Sigman, S. J. (1992). Do social approaches to interpersonal communication constitute a contribution to communication theory? *Communication Theory*, 2, 347–356.

Spandler, H., & Carr, S. (2020). A history of lesbian politics and the psy professions. *Feminism & Psychology*, 31(1), 119–139.

Sparker, A. (2005). Narrative analysis: Exploring the what's and how's of personal stories. In I. Holloway (Ed.), *Qualitative research in health care* (pp. 191–208). Open University Press.

Stark, S. D. (2005). *Meet the Beatles: A cultural history of the band that shook youth, gender, and the world*. Harper Entertainment/HarperCollins Publishers.

Street, J. (2012). *Music and politics*. Polity Press.

Vaismoradi, M., Jones, J., Turunen, H., & Snelgrove, S. (2016). Theme development in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 6(5), 100–110.

Warwick, J. (2007). *Girl groups, girl culture: Popular music and identity in the 1960s*. Routledge.

Wetherell, M. (1998). Positioning and interpretative repertoires: Conversation analysis and post-structuralism in dialogue. *Discourse & Society*, 9(3), 387–412.

Womack, K. (2014). *The Beatles encyclopedia: Everything fab four*. ABC-CLIO.

Yip, J. W. C. (2020). Psychotherapeutic potential of online self-help groups. *Communication & Medicine*, 15(3), 293–305.

Yip, J. W. C., & Kong, K. C. C. (2025). Identity construction of Hong Kong's Chief Executive in blogs: A corpus-informed study. In S. M. Leung & S. W. Chan (Eds.), *Applying technology to language and translation* (pp. 40–58). Routledge.

Kantapon Intamart

Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University,
Bangkok, Thailand

kantapon.i@chula.ac.th

ORCID ID: 0009-0003-8780-561X

Guardians of Grammar, Gatekeepers of Gender: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Académie Française's Report on the Feminization of Professional Titles

Article history:

Received 1 June 2025

Revised 17 July 2025

Accepted 19 July 2025

Available online 16 December 2025

Abstract: This article examines how the Académie française constructs its institutional position on the feminization of professional and official titles

in French. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and integrating Feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005), the study analyzes the Académie's 2019 report as a case of symbolic discourse management. It investigates how feminization is framed linguistically, discursively, and ideologically. At the textual level, the report employs hedging, modality, and passive constructions to convey caution and deflect institutional responsibility. At the discursive level, the Académie constructs an image of neutrality and methodological restraint while subtly delegitimizing feminist discourse through rhetorical distancing. At the sociocultural level, feminization is normalized in lower-prestige professions but resisted in elite or masculine-coded domains, maintaining symbolic gender hierarchies. Legal and international considerations are mobilized to justify procedural caution. The analysis reveals three cross-level patterns: cautious distancing, symbolic boundary maintenance, and discursive deferral. These findings demonstrate that the Académie's discourse not only reflects but actively manages institutional authority, gender norms, and the boundaries of acceptable linguistic change. The study contributes to debates on language policy and gender equality by framing feminization as a site of ideological governance rather than grammatical evolution.

Keywords: Académie française, critical discourse analysis, feminization, gender and language, institutional discourse

Introduction

The French language has long been regulated by grammatical conventions that privilege the masculine form as the default. In recent decades, however, increasing societal attention to gender equity and inclusion has sparked growing debate about whether French should evolve to reflect changing social realities. Central to this debate is the feminization of professional and official titles, along with the broader adoption of *écriture inclusive* [inclusive writing], which challenge the universality of masculine generics and aim to enhance the visibility of women and gender minorities in language.

While inclusive forms have gained traction in academic, activist, and corporate settings, institutional resistance remains strong—particularly from legacy bodies that shape linguistic authority. Chief among them is the Académie française, a centuries-old institution that defines the boundaries of “correct” French. Its 2019 report *La féminisation des noms de métiers et de fonctions* [The feminization of job and official titles] articulates the Académie’s stance on feminization. Though carefully avoiding overt ideological claims, the report repeatedly invokes terms like *bon usage* [proper usage] and *souplesse* [flexibility] to assert a preference for stability, deferring reform to the pace of collective usage and presenting linguistic evolution as a passive process.

This paper analyzes how the Académie française enacts discursive leadership in managing institutional authority, public legitimacy, and gender inclusivity through language. Drawing on *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993) and *Feminist CDA* (Lazar, 2005), the study examines how feminization is not only framed as a grammatical issue, but as a matter of symbolic governance. Although prior studies (e.g., Janoušková, 2015; Dawes, 2003) have surveyed feminization policies across Francophone contexts, few have explored how the Académie itself uses discourse to manage ideological boundaries and exert control over change.

Positioning the Académie as a case of symbolic and institutional discourse management, the study demonstrates how its rhetorical strategies regulate not only linguistic norms but also the tempo and scope of gender reform. In doing so, it contributes to broader conversations about how language functions as a form of organizational leadership—particularly in navigating inclusion, authority, and cultural legitimacy.

Literature Review

This study builds on three main areas of research: critical discourse analysis (CDA), feminist approaches to language and power, and previous studies on *écriture inclusive* [inclusive writing] and institutional reactions to it. These frameworks are useful for understanding how powerful institutions like

the Académie française use language to resist or slow down social and linguistic change.

Feminization

In the context of this study, feminization refers to the creation, recognition, and promotion of feminine forms for professional and official titles in grammatically gendered languages like French. While some feminized forms have existed for centuries—such as *actrice* or *infirmière*—their usage has often been limited to roles considered traditionally ‘feminine’ or less prestigious. In contrast, titles associated with authority or institutional power—such as *ambassadeur*, *professeur*, or *chef*—have long resisted feminization, not always for linguistic reasons, but often due to social and ideological factors (Janoušková, 2015; Dawes, 2003).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, feminization is not only a morphological process, but also a symbolic intervention. As Pauwels (1998) explains, it challenges the idea that masculine forms can function as neutral or universal. This default status of the masculine often described as *le masculin générique* [male generic] has contributed to a long-standing invisibility of women and gender minorities in official discourse. Feminization seeks to correct this imbalance by making gendered presence visible in language. However, as Viennot (2014) shows, many feminine forms that once existed in earlier French (e.g., *autrice*) were intentionally removed from dictionaries and official usage, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, as part of a broader masculinization of language.

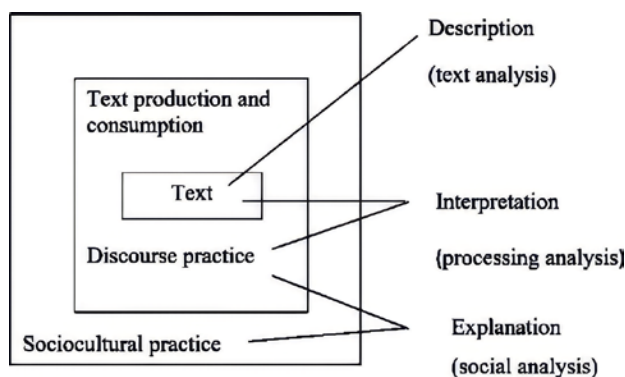
In this sense, feminization goes beyond terminology. It is a way to question who gets to be represented, who defines linguistic norms, and how language reflects or resists social change. This study draws on these theoretical perspectives to explore how the Académie française, a highly symbolic language institution, engages with feminization in its official discourse—particularly through strategies that frame reform as either premature, unstable, or subject to societal approval rather than institutional initiative.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a useful approach for studying how language is connected to power and ideology. According to Fairclough (1989, 1995), discourse is not just about words or grammar; it is also a form of social practice. This means that when people or institutions use language, they are also shaping and maintaining the structures of society. Fairclough's model involves three levels:

- 1) The textual level—how the language is structured, what vocabulary is chosen, and what grammar is used.
- 2) The discursive practice—how the text is produced, distributed, and understood.
- 3) The sociocultural practice—what broader ideologies or power relations the text reflects.

Figure 1. Fairclough's 3D model of critical discourse analysis



Source: Fairclough (1989, 1995).

This model is very relevant when analyzing the language used in official reports. For example, the Académie française, which is responsible for protecting the French language, often uses formal and academic language in its publications. This gives the impression that their views are neutral or based purely on grammar.

But through CDA, we can see that these linguistic choices can also reflect deeper beliefs about gender, tradition, and who has the right to control the language.

In addition to Fairclough, van Dijk (1993) adds another important perspective. He focuses on how discourse shapes the way people think—not just what is said, but how ideas are organized and presented. Van Dijk highlights that powerful groups, such as governments, media, or language authorities, often use discourse to control public opinion and maintain their position in society. In this case, we can use his ideas to examine how the Académie presents its opposition to inclusive writing as logical or objective, while framing supporters of change as emotional or ideological.

Together, Fairclough and van Dijk provide a strong foundation for analyzing institutional discourse. Their models help reveal how power can be maintained through language, even in subtle, polite or implicit ways.

Feminist CDA and Linguistic Sexism

While CDA provides the general framework, this study also uses Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to focus more specifically on gender. Lazar (2005) points out that mainstream discourse often hides or downplays gender inequality. FCDA tries to show how language supports male dominance—even in texts that appear neutral. It looks for patterns in how women and men are described, who is given voice, and what kinds of roles are made visible or invisible in language.

Cameron (1992) also criticizes the idea that language is just a mirror of society. Instead, she argues that language plays a role in creating gender roles and expectations. In her view, linguistic forms are not only shaped by culture but are also used to shape it in return. For example, when masculine forms are used as the ‘default’ in French (e.g., *les citoyens* [the citizens] to refer to a mixed group), this not only reflects male-centered thinking but also reinforces it in the minds of speakers.

Another important work is by Pauwels (1998), who looks at how women remain underrepresented in grammatically gendered languages like French. She argues that even when women enter new roles in society, the language often does not catch up. Words like *madame l’ambassadeur* [Madam the (masculine)

ambassador] or madame *le maire* [Madam the (masculine) mayor] for a woman show how the masculine form continues to dominate official and public language. This shows how linguistic structures can slow down social progress by keeping masculine forms as the 'norm'.

These feminist works support the idea that grammar is not only about structure but also about ideology. They help us ask further questions: Why are some forms seen as 'neutral'? Who decides which forms are acceptable? And what happens when people try to change the language?

Écriture Inclusive and Institutional Resistance

The third area focuses on *écriture inclusive* [inclusive writing] and the pushback it receives, especially from institutions. One of the most well-known voices in this field is Éliane Viennot (2014), who argues that opposition to inclusive writing is not really about grammar—it's about keeping male-centered norms in place. She shows that many feminine forms existed in earlier versions of French, like *autrice* [authoress], but were later removed on purpose to strengthen masculine dominance. Her research helps to challenge the idea that masculine forms are more 'natural' or 'logical'.

Other studies have looked at how feminization and inclusive writing are being received in different areas. Dawes (2003) studies how different Francophone countries approach the feminization of job titles. She shows that regions like Québec and Belgium have institutionalized feminization more readily, while France has demonstrated greater resistance, often citing tradition and linguistic stability as reasons for delaying reform. Janoušková (2015) focuses on how certain feminine forms have disappeared from standard French—not because they were incorrect, but because they were *politically inconvenient*.

More recently, Boutron and Weber (2022) examine how the French military has reacted to inclusive language and feminization. Their study shows that even in modern institutions, there is still a lot of resistance, often hidden behind claims of professionalism, neutrality, or efficiency. This resistance, they argue, is part of a larger pattern of controlling how gender is represented in public space.

Although these works give us a good picture of the debates around inclusive writing, very few have analyzed how the Académie française talks about these issues in its own words. The Academy holds a special place in French society—it not only sets the rules of grammar but also carries symbolic power as the guardian of national identity. Yet, the discourse it produces has not been studied in detail using tools like CDA or FCDA. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the Académie's 2019 report on the feminization of job titles. It will focus not only on what the Academy says, but how it says it—and what that reveals about the power of language in shaping public attitudes toward gender and change.

Objectives and Hypotheses of the Research

This study aims to investigate how institutional discourse, particularly that of the Académie française, contributes to shaping the linguistic landscape in relation to gender and language reform. Drawing on the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist CDA, the research sets out the following objectives and hypotheses:

Objectives:

- 1) To examine the linguistic features and rhetorical strategies used in the Académie française's report on the feminization of professional and official titles, focusing on how specific lexical choices, syntactic patterns, and modal expressions shape the institutional stance.
- 2) To analyze how discourse functions at both the discursive and sociocultural levels to maintain traditional language norms, manage institutional authority, and respond to ongoing debates about gender inclusivity in French language policy.

Hypotheses:

- 1) The report employs linguistic strategies such as hedging, nominalization, and appeals to *bon usage* [proper usage] to reinforce the Académie's

image as neutral and tradition-bound, thereby discouraging rapid language change.

- 2) At the discursive and sociocultural levels, the Académie's discourse contributes to sustaining male-centered language norms and institutional power by presenting feminization as unstable, non-universal, or socially premature.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), focusing on the *Rapport sur la féminisation des noms de métiers et de fonctions* published by the Académie française in 2019. The aim is to examine how institutional discourse constructs, negotiates, and constrains the feminization of occupational titles in French, and to reveal the ideological positions embedded within the report.

Corpus Presentation

The corpus selected for this study is the 2019 report titled *La féminisation des noms de métiers, titres, grades et fonctions*, published by the Académie française. As the institution's most detailed and formal statement on the subject to date, the document offers a structured articulation of its stance on the feminization of professional and official titles in the French language. Divided into four main sections, the report addresses: (I) the evolving sociolinguistic context that has prompted renewed attention to gendered language; (II) the methodology adopted by the Académie, including the creation of a dedicated commission; (III) the linguistic treatment of job titles, with attention to morphological patterns and usage; and (IV) considerations related to titles of function, honorific ranks, and legal constraints.

The following sub-sections provide a concise presentation of each part of the report and intend to foreground the content of the text before turning to their critical analysis.

Part I—The Context (*Le contexte*)

The first part of the report outlines the sociolinguistic context that frames the debate on the feminization of professional and official titles. It acknowledges that, in recent decades, French-speaking societies—particularly France—have experienced profound social changes, most notably the increased presence of women in a wide range of professions and public functions. Despite this shift, linguistic practices have not evolved at the same pace. Many titles and professional terms still rely on masculine forms, even when referring to women.

The report notes a growing demand from women to have the positions they occupy linguistically recognized through appropriate feminine forms. This demand is portrayed as part of a broader expectation for the language to reflect social realities more accurately. However, the Académie emphasizes that current linguistic usage remains unsettled. The available evidence, drawn from a limited corpus collected with the assistance of the *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* (DGLFLF), indicates that usage is marked by variation, hesitation, and inconsistency.

There is, according to the Académie, no coherent or stabilized trend toward feminization across sectors or regions. Furthermore, many forms coexist chaotically: masculine nouns with feminine articles, attempts at morphological feminization, and fluctuating agreement patterns. Because of this lack of uniformity, existing dictionaries, including the Académie's own, are said to be unable to capture or codify these emerging practices.

The Académie restates its role as one of observation rather than prescription. It asserts that its dictionary reflects *bon usage* [proper usage] only once such usage has stabilized across the community. While acknowledging the possibility of integrating feminized forms into future editions, the institution signals that, at the time of writing, the state of usage did not yet warrant official codification.

Part II—The Method (*La méthode*)

The second part of the report describes the methodological approach adopted by the Académie française in addressing the issue of feminization. Faced with

the complexity and sensitivity of the topic, the Académie chose to establish a dedicated commission tasked with studying the evolution of linguistic usage concerning professional and official titles. This commission was chaired by Gabriel de Broglie and composed of several members of the Académie, as well as external linguistic and historical experts.

The commission held nine meetings and based its work on both internal deliberations and consultation of external sources, including specialized linguistic studies and examples of contemporary usage collected by the *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* (DGLFLF). It also benefited from the expertise of Robert Martin and Olivier Soutet, specialists in historical French grammar and lexicology.

Importantly, the report specifies that the commission's mission was limited in scope: it was tasked with studying the feminization of *noms de personnes* [nouns referring to people]—that is, professional titles and functions—without challenging the fundamental rules of French grammar more broadly. The Académie emphasizes that the commission adopted a pragmatic rather than a dogmatic approach, aiming to respond to the realities of linguistic evolution without imposing artificial or theoretical reforms.

Moreover, the commission acknowledged the generational shift taking place: while previous generations of women often accepted masculine titles as a mark of professional equality, newer generations increasingly favor feminized forms that affirm gender identity. However, the Académie underlines that its recommendations are based not on prescriptive ideology but on observed and well-established linguistic practices.

Part III—Professional Titles (Les noms de métiers)

The third section of the report focuses on the feminization of professional titles, examining both historical developments and contemporary usage. The Académie acknowledges that there is no inherent grammatical barrier to feminizing job titles in French. On the contrary, the language has long exhibited feminine forms for professions, some of which date back to the Middle Ages—for instance, *chirurgienne* [female surgeon], *commandante* [female commander], and forms

ending in *-esse*, such as *mairesse* [female mayor] or *chanteresse* [female singer in a choir]. This process continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly as women entered new professions during and after the World Wars.

The report notes that many feminine forms are already well established and recorded in recent editions of the Académie's dictionary, particularly for manual or service-related professions historically associated with women. It confirms that the feminization of these roles has occurred 'naturally' over time and that their inclusion in the dictionary has followed accordingly. However, the Académie also points out that not all feminized forms have been accepted or stabilized; some fell into disuse (e.g., *peintresse* or *doctoresse*), while others remain contested.

A detailed discussion is devoted to morphological patterns of feminization, such as *-er/-ère*, *-ien/-ienne*, *-teur/-trice*, and *-eur/-euse*. Particular attention is given to the *-eur* suffix, where both *-euse* and *-eure* endings coexist or compete, depending on whether the noun is derived from a verb. The commission notes that this area remains linguistically dynamic and lacks a unified norm.

The Académie also addresses cases where feminization appears to be more problematic. Terms such as *écrivaine* [female writer], *cheffe* [female chief], and *autrice* [authoress] are discussed as examples where usage is growing but remains unsettled or disputed. In the case of *chef*, the report lists a variety of experimental or marginal forms (*cheffe*, *cheftaine*, *cheffesse*, *chève*), but concludes that none have clearly emerged as dominant.

The report observes that resistance to feminization tends to increase in proportion to the symbolic or hierarchical status of the title in question. Feminine forms are more readily accepted for roles of lower or intermediate status, while higher-ranking positions appear more resistant to change. Furthermore, the Académie notes that some women themselves prefer to retain masculine titles as a sign of professional legitimacy or personal choice.

In closing, the Académie reaffirms that it does not seek to impose standardized solutions. Instead, it recommends flexibility and attentiveness to the realities of usage, with an aim to accompany linguistic evolution rather than to prescribe it.

Part IV—Official Functions, Titles, and Ranks (Les noms de fonctions, titres et grades)

The fourth and final part of the report addresses the feminization of titles related to official functions, honorific titles, and hierarchical ranks. The Académie begins by affirming that, as with professional titles, language should reflect the evolving participation of women in domains from which they were historically excluded. However, it argues that the feminization of functions and ranks presents additional complexities that require cautious treatment.

The report distinguishes between the exercise of a profession, which is closely linked to individual skill and identity, and the holding of an official function, rank, or title, which is conceptualized as more abstract, impersonal, and independent of the officeholder's gender. Functions and ranks—particularly those in the public sector, diplomacy, or the military—are described as symbolic roles tied to the institutional structure itself, rather than to personal identity.

This distinction explains why feminization, although increasingly visible at the lexical level, remains less systematic in higher offices. The Académie emphasizes that functions at the top of the hierarchy, such as *ambassadeur* [ambassador] or *préfet* [prefect], historically resist feminization more strongly. In some cases, pre-existing feminine forms, such as *ambassadrice*, originally referred not to the female officeholder but to the wife of an ambassador, adding further complications to reform efforts.

The report also notes significant variation in practices across the Francophone world. Some countries, particularly in North America and parts of Europe, have embraced feminization more readily, while others remain conservative. This variability is cited as another reason for the Académie's recommendation of flexibility and case-by-case adaptation, rather than the imposition of rigid new norms.

Legal and administrative considerations are also raised. The Académie warns that premature or inconsistent feminization could lead to ambiguities or conflicts in legal documents and official designations. Therefore, it suggests that feminization must balance linguistic sensitivity with legal precision and institutional clarity.

Finally, the Académie concludes that, although the feminization of functions and ranks is progressing, it remains an uneven and evolving phenomenon. It recommends continued observation of usage and refrains from offering fixed prescriptions. Instead, it advocates an approach that respects both linguistic traditions and the ongoing transformations of French-speaking societies.

In sum, the 2019 report by the Académie française provides a comprehensive yet cautious overview of the evolving question of feminization in French. Structured across four sections, the document addresses the social context, outlines a pragmatic methodological approach, surveys the historical and morphological dimensions of professional titles, and discusses the complexities surrounding official functions and ranks. While acknowledging social change, the Académie consistently emphasizes prudence, flexibility, and deference to established usage, setting the tone for the discursive patterns analyzed in the following sections.

Data Selection

Given the qualitative nature of this research and the objective of uncovering discursive patterns, the entire report was examined through close reading. Relevant excerpts were systematically extracted based on their significance to institutional positioning, gender ideologies in language, and references to linguistic norms. French quotations are presented in their original form and are accompanied by English translations to ensure clarity and accessibility across linguistic audiences.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is grounded in CDA, particularly drawing on the works of Norman Fairclough (1989, 1995) and Teun van Dijk (1993), who view discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and reproduces power relations. In addition, the study integrates insights from Feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005), which highlights how discourse constructs gender ideologies and reinforces male-dominant norms under the guise of neutrality.

The analytical focus is on three levels of discourse, following Fairclough's model:

- 1) Textual level: lexical choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical strategies used in the document.
- 2) Discursive practice: how the Académie frames its role in language regulation and its engagement with public debates on feminization.
- 3) Social practice: the broader ideological implications concerning gender, authority, and language change in French society.

Each selected excerpt was coded according to the discourse strategy it employed (e.g., legitimation through tradition, hedging, neutral framing, anti-prescriptivism), its position within the CDA levels, and its underlying ideological function.

Limitations

While this qualitative research allows for an informed perspective, it also brings certain limitations. First, the analysis focuses solely on the Académie's official discourse without triangulation through interviews or alternative institutional voices. Second, although CDA allows for detailed qualitative interpretation, it remains subjective to some extent. Efforts were made to mitigate this by clearly defining coding categories and by anchoring interpretations in established CDA frameworks.

Rationale for Document-Based Approach

Choosing to analyze an institutional document rather than media texts or classroom materials aligns with the study's objective of uncovering how official discourse manages linguistic gender reform. The *Rapport* offers a particularly rich corpus, as it is authored by the institution most responsible for maintaining linguistic standards in French. Studying this document also allows the research to explore the tension between language ideology, public usage, and institutional authority in a controlled and well-bounded context.

Findings

The findings are organized according to Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis: textual, discursive, and sociocultural levels. Each level, though intercorrelated, offers a distinct lens through which to examine how the Académie française constructs its position on the feminization of professional and official titles. Taken together, these levels reveal a layered institutional discourse that operates through caution, detachment, and strategic preservation of normative hierarchies.

Textual Level

At the textual level, the report reveals a consistent reliance on linguistic strategies that foreground hesitation, neutrality, and conditionality. Modal verbs such as *semble* [seems], *peut* [may], and epistemic adverbs like *évidemment* [obviously] are frequently employed to hedge propositions, creating a rhetorical distance between the institution and the reform it discusses. Passive constructions and abstract nouns—such as *le bon usage* [proper usage], *le flottement* [fluctuation], and *la sanction de l'usage* [sanction of usage]—further remove the Académie from the site of agency. These choices frame feminization not as an institutional responsibility but as a phenomenon external to the Académie, subject to social validation before any formal recognition. In this way, the report constructs a tone of detached objectivity while reinforcing traditional linguistic boundaries (see Annex: Table 1).

Discursive Level

At the discursive level, the Académie française projects an image of institutional rationality and restraint. Rather than advocating any strong stance, the report delegates the matter to a commission, thus externalizing deliberation. It repeatedly emphasizes the commission's 'non-dogmatic' approach, its methodological grounding in usage observation, and the Académie's role as a guardian rather than a reformer. Phrases such as *la liberté de l'usage* [freedom of usage] and *il n'entre*

pas dans la mission de l'Académie... [it is not the Académie's role...] contribute to the construction of a discourse that appears neutral and consultative. Yet these same strategies also serve to minimize institutional accountability and deflect activist or ideological critiques. The institution's discursive self-framing, rooted in traditions of learned objectivity, masks its role in gatekeeping linguistic legitimacy (see Annex: Table 2).

Sociocultural Level

At the sociocultural level, the findings point to deeper patterns of symbolic power and gendered social stratification embedded in the Académie's stance. The report shows a clear distinction between how feminization is received in low-prestige versus high-prestige professions. Feminine forms like *infirmière* or *caissière* are treated as normalized, while titles such as *ambassadrice*, *autrice*, and *cheffe* are portrayed as unstable, marked, or even problematic. This pattern reveals an implicit hierarchy of linguistic legitimacy that aligns with societal prestige where masculine forms continue to dominate at the top of the institutional order. Moreover, the report frequently references legal constraints, symbolic ambiguities, and cross-national variation to justify its cautious stance. Such references not only reinforce the perception of feminization as an ongoing societal debate but also reposition the Académie as a passive observer rather than an active agent of change (see Annex: Table 3).

Discussion

This study set out to investigate how the Académie française constructs its institutional discourse on the feminization of professional and official titles. Through a critical discourse analysis grounded in Fairclough's (1995) tri-level model—textual, discursive, and sociocultural—the paper reveals how language operates not merely as a medium of representation, but as a strategic resource for institutional self-management. The findings confirm both hypotheses: first, that specific linguistic strategies are used to project neutrality while safeguarding

masculine-centric norms; and second, that the Académie's discourse delays or deflects feminist linguistic reforms through calculated discursive leadership.

At the textual level, the Académie relies heavily on hedging, modality, and lexical distancing to manage its stance. Modal verbs like *semble* [seems] and *peut* [may], alongside epistemic adverbs such as *évidemment* [obviously], allow the institution to present its commentary as cautious observation rather than intervention. Passive constructions and abstract formulations—*le bon usage* [proper usage], *la sanction de l'usage* [sanction of usage]—function to obscure agency. Such linguistic choices create an aura of descriptive neutrality, but as Fairclough (1995) argues, these rhetorical strategies often mask ideological investments. Here, neutrality becomes a managerial act: the institution governs its authority not through explicit imposition but through discursive restraint. By invoking *naturellement* [naturally] to explain why masculine forms persist, the Académie disavows its historical role in institutionalizing gender asymmetries. As Viennot (2014) notes, the so-called “natural” evolution of French has entailed repeated acts of symbolic exclusion of feminine forms. Thus, the Académie's textual strategies serve not merely to describe change, but to manage its tempo and direction.

At the discursive level, the Académie presents itself as a methodical, apolitical body committed to tradition and observation. It delegates responsibility for addressing feminization to a commission—described as non-dogmatic and empirically grounded—which permits the institution to distance itself from ideological engagement. This rhetorical maneuver exemplifies what Lazar (2005) terms a “feminist CDA” problem: feminist or activist positions are routinely reframed as emotionally driven or politically extreme, while conservative institutions position themselves as neutral stewards of common sense. The invocation of *la liberté de l'usage* [freedom of usage] similarly functions as an ideological alibi. Though presented as democratic, it defers responsibility to the public while reserving the Académie's power to determine when usage becomes “stable” enough for institutional recognition.

These moves reveal the Académie as a case study in discursive leadership. Rather than manage reform through policy or direct authority, it manages language ideologically—regulating change through a discourse of institutional

caution, proceduralism, and symbolic legitimacy. As Candau (2024) notes, such technical discourse creates buffers that delay politically sensitive transformation. In this sense, the Académie's report exemplifies how organizations can perform symbolic governance—managing public expectations, preserving institutional prestige, and regulating dissent—all through discourse. This style of leadership is highly relevant to organizational studies: it illustrates how institutions negotiate evolving norms not by overt resistance but by crafting a carefully hedged communicative identity that preserves continuity under the guise of consultation.

At the sociocultural level, the analysis reveals how symbolic hierarchies are preserved through controlled openness. Feminization is accepted for roles historically associated with women or of lower symbolic capital (*infirmière* [nurse], *secrétaire* [secretary]) but becomes contentious when applied to prestigious or authoritative titles (*ambassadeur* [ambassador], *chef* [chief]). This pattern of selective resistance indicates that linguistic conservatism is less about grammatical constraints than about safeguarding masculine-coded domains of power. As Motschenbacher (2018) and Boutron & Weber (2022) argue, language functions as a site of symbolic struggle; institutional discomfort with feminizing leadership titles stems from the threat such changes pose to entrenched symbolic capital.

Moreover, the Académie repeatedly invokes legal precision and international variation to justify its reluctance. It warns against premature reforms that could destabilize legal documents or institutional clarity. These references serve to rationalize inaction and construct linguistic inclusivity as a threat to administrative coherence. As Loison et al. (2020) observe, legal discourse often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism—masking inequality as procedural caution. In doing so, the Académie effectively neutralizes feminist reform not by outright rejection, but by enveloping it in discourse that privileges legalism, tradition, and stability.

Three cross-level discursive patterns emerge from the analysis:

- 1) Cautious distancing: The Académie consistently avoids direct reform initiatives, instead positioning itself as a passive observer of social evolution. Through modality, delegation, and appeals to future consensus,

it shifts responsibility onto public usage while retaining authority to arbitrate linguistic legitimacy.

- 2) Symbolic boundary maintenance: Feminization is permitted only when it does not challenge domains linked to institutional prestige. The boundaries of acceptable change are drawn to protect masculine-coded titles from redefinition, revealing the depth of gendered symbolic stratification.
- 3) Delegitimization of activist discourse: Feminist proposals are framed as linguistically unstable or ideologically excessive. This rhetorical maneuver casts reform as socially premature and linguistically incoherent, while the Académie's own conservatism is positioned as impartial expertise.

These patterns illustrate how institutional language becomes a tool of symbolic management. The Académie's report does not merely reflect grammatical change—it actively polices the boundaries of linguistic and social legitimacy. Its strategic communication reveals how institutions shape public narratives, protect traditional hierarchies, and slow disruptive change—all while appearing neutral and democratic. In this way, the report embodies the very theme of the special issue: it demonstrates why language in management matters.

Ultimately, the Académie's discourse reflects not just a philosophy of language, but a politics of leadership. It manages reform not by enacting it, but by staging it—controlling when and how language change becomes admissible. Such discursive leadership highlights the central role of language in institutional governance, identity formation, and equality policy. If, as this issue contends, language is a tool of management, then the Académie's carefully crafted neutrality is one of its most enduring instruments of control.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Académie française's report on feminization functions not merely as a linguistic commentary but as an act of symbolic and discursive management. Through rhetorical strategies of cautious distancing, boundary maintenance, and discursive deferral, the institution consolidates its

authority while managing reform in ways that protect masculine-coded norms. The discourse it deploys is not neutral; it is a calculated exercise in institutional leadership through language.

The Académie performs what this article identifies as discursive leadership: it preserves legitimacy, steers public perception, and contains ideological disruption without overtly opposing change. Feminization is permitted only where it does not challenge institutional prestige. Where symbolic power is at stake—especially in elite titles—reform is delayed, reframed, or rhetorically undermined. This management of inclusion is deeply consequential, as it affects whose identities are officially recognized and how equality is operationalized within linguistic systems.

By framing language reform as contingent on “stabilized usage” or legal clarity, the Académie regulates not only how language changes, but when and under what conditions it may do so. In doing so, it exemplifies how institutions use language to manage authority, identity, and continuity under the guise of technical neutrality.

Future research should investigate how other institutional actors—such as ministries, corporate HR departments, or educational policy bodies—navigate inclusive language norms. Comparative studies across sectors and Francophone regions could enrich our understanding of how symbolic governance unfolds differently across organizational landscapes. Such inquiries would further reveal the broader implications of linguistic feminization as a question of management—of meaning, legitimacy, and social belonging.

References

Académie française (2019). La féminisation des noms de métiers et de fonctions [The feminization of job and official titles]. Retrieved from https://www.academie-francaise.fr/sites/academie-francaise.fr/files/rapport_feminisation_noms_de_metier_et_de_fonction.pdf. Accessed 29 October 2025.

Boutron, C., & Weber, C. (2022). The “feminization” of the French military: Institutional commitment and internal resistance. *Travail, genre et sociétés*, 47, 37–56.

- Cameron, D. (1992).** *Feminism and linguistic theory*. London: Palgrave.
- Candau, O. S. (2024).** La féminisation de la langue: un débat linguistique? Lecture croisée des discours de l'Académie française. *Multilinguales*, 21.
- Dawes, E. (2003).** La féminisation des titres et fonctions dans la Francophonie: De la morphologie à l'idéologie. *Ethnologies*, 25(2), 195–213.
- Fairclough, N. (1989).** *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (1995).** *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Longman.
- Janoušková, J. (2015).** Femme, je ne cesse pas d'écrire ton nom... À propos de la féminisation des noms de métiers, titres, grades et fonctions. *Romanica Olomucensia*, 27(1), 57–71.
- Lazar, M. (2005).** *Feminist critical discourse analysis: Gender, power and ideology in discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Loison, M., Perrier, G. & Noûs, C. (2020).** Introduction. Le langage inclusif est politique: une spécificité française? *Cahiers du Genre*, 69(2), 5–29.
- Motschenbacher, H. (2018).** Language and sexual normativity. In K. Hall & R. Barrett (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of language and sexuality* (online ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Pauwels, A. (1998).** *Women changing language*. London: Longman.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1993).** Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 249–283.
- Viennot, É. (2014).** *Non, le masculin ne l'emporte pas sur le féminin!* Éditions iXe.

Annex

Table 1. CDA Analysis–Textual Level

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Linguistic Feature(s)
Une attente [...] de femmes [...] combler ce qu'elles ressentent comme une lacune de la langue	An expectation from a growing number of women... who wish to fill what they feel is a gap in the language	Epistemic verb (<i>ressentent</i>) indicating subjectivity
Des usages qui restent hésitantes et incertaines	Usages that remain hesitant and uncertain	Adjectival hedging (<i>hésitantes, incertaines</i>)
Le grand flottement que l'on constate entre les usages existants	the great fluctuation observed between existing usages	Abstract noun (<i>flottement</i>)
'Cheffe' semble avoir la faveur de l'usage	'Cheffe' seems to be favored in usage	Modal verb (<i>semble</i>) indicating uncertainty
Ces mots sont entrés naturellement dans l'usage	These words have naturally entered usage	Adverb (<i>naturellement</i>) implying passive evolution
Presque toutes [...] possèdent déjà un féminin reconnu	Almost all titles already have a recognized feminine form	Passive adjective (<i>reconnu</i>)
Il n'est évidemment pas question de modifier [...] les usages existants	It is obviously not a matter of modifying existing usages	Negation structure + epistemic adverb (<i>évidemment</i>)
Deux formes de féminisation des noms en '-eur' semblent entrer en compétition	Two feminized forms of nouns ending in '-eur' seem to be in competition	Modal verb (<i>semblent</i>)
L'Académie [...] enregistrera [...] les formes [...] après la sanction de l'usage	The Académie will record the forms only after they are sanctioned by usage	Future tense verb + nominal abstraction (<i>sanction</i>)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 2. CDA Analysis—Discursive Level

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Discursive Strategies
La commission a estimé qu'elle devait s'abstenir de toute position dogmatique	The commission considered it should refrain from any dogmatic position	Framing neutrality
L'objet même de sa mission [...] excluait par conséquent toute velléité de remettre en cause les règles générales	The very subject of its mission excluded any intent to question the general rules	Institutional boundary-setting
L'Académie [...] enregistrera [...] les formes [...] après la sanction de l'usage	The Académie will record the forms only after they are sanctioned by usage	Deference to external authority
La commission [...] a toujours fondé ses recommandations sur le «bon usage» dont elle est la gardienne	The commission has always based its recommendations on the 'proper usage' of which it is the guardian	Self-legitimation through tradition
L'Académie [...] refuse toute tentative pour forcer l'usage	The Académie refuses any attempt to force usage	Anti-prescriptivist distancing
L'Académie [...] en appelle à la liberté de l'usage [...] certaines femmes souhaitent conserver les appellations masculines	The Académie appeals to freedom of usage ... some women prefer to keep masculine titles	Invocation of individual choice to justify non-intervention
Elle a décidé de confier à une commission l'étude de l'évolution de l'usage	It decided to entrust a commission with the study of usage evolution	Delegation of responsibility
La commission a fait le choix de ne pas méconnaître les difficultés pratiques [...] en vue d'indiquer les voies [...] d'une évolution harmonieuse	The commission chose not to ignore the practical difficulties... to suggest paths for a harmonious evolution	Pragmatic framing of cautious change

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Discursive Strategies
La féminisation des noms de métiers... soulève diverses questions...	The feminization of job titles raises various questions...	Framing the issue as complex and unresolved
Il n'existe aucun obstacle de principe à la féminisation...	There is no principle-based obstacle to feminization...	Strategic minimization of institutional resistance
Mais l'usage est une réalité complexe...	But usage is a complex reality...	Framing linguistic change as difficult to systematize
Il n'est pas question de modifier les usages existants...	It is not a matter of modifying existing usages...	Defensive stance through negation
Il n'entre pas dans la mission de l'Académie d'anticiper sur les évolutions...	It is not the Académie's role to anticipate linguistic evolution...	Institutional role distancing
La langue féminise faiblement les noms au sommet de l'échelle sociale...	The language weakly feminizes titles at the top of the social hierarchy...	Highlighting symbolic boundaries of prestige
La forme 'agente' commence à s'implanter mais rencontre une résistance...	The form 'agente' is beginning to take hold but faces resistance...	Acknowledgment of social conflict
La féminisation est particulièrement répandue dans les métiers exercés par les femmes...	Feminization is particularly widespread in jobs commonly held by women...	Normalization of feminization in non-prestigious roles

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 3. CDA Analysis–Sociocultural Level

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Sociocultural framing
La langue doit transcrire fidèlement l'exercice par les femmes des fonctions... auxquelles [...] elles n'ont pas eu accès.	Language must faithfully reflect women's access to roles they were long excluded from.	Moral legitimization of reform grounded in social equity
L'imposition de schémas théoriques ou l'édiction de normes abstraites s'avèrent [...] inopérantes.	The imposition of theoretical models or abstract norms proves ineffective.	Delegitimization of top-down reform through anti-ideological stance
Aucune contrainte imposée au langage ne suffirait à changer les pratiques sociales.	No constraint imposed on language can change social practices.	Deterministic displacement of agency from language to society
Il est indéniable que la langue a [...] marqué une certaine réserve à féminiser les appellations [...] des fonctions supérieures...	It is undeniable that the language has shown some reserve in feminizing titles linked to higher-level functions...	Indexing linguistic resistance to symbolic power structures
Il convient d'observer [...] la grande variété des usages ayant cours dans les pays francophones...	It is important to observe the wide variety of usage in Francophone countries...	Relativization of linguistic norms through international comparison
Les seules ambiguïtés qui subsistent sont limitées à une sphère sociale très étroite [...] et sont sans doute transitoires...	The remaining ambiguities are limited to a very narrow social sphere and are likely temporary...	Minimization of ongoing sociolinguistic tensions
Il convient en outre d'évaluer les conséquences juridiques de la féminisation...	It is also necessary to assess the legal consequences of feminization...	Linking language reform to institutional/legal constraints
La langue féminise faiblement ou pas les noms des métiers [...] au sommet de l'échelle sociale.	The language weakly feminizes or does not feminize job titles at the top of the social hierarchy.	Correlation of linguistic gender with prestige and hierarchy
Certaines femmes souhaitent conserver les appellations masculines...	Some women wish to keep masculine titles...	Reframing feminist reform as a matter of individual preference

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Sociocultural framing
Le Dictionnaire... a pour vocation... de dire le bon usage dès lors qu'il est établi et consacré.	The Dictionary's role is to reflect proper usage once it is established and consecrated.	Institutional authority as conservative guardian of norms
'Cheffe' semble avoir la faveur de l'usage...	'Cheffe' seems to be favored in usage...	Tentative recognition of female leadership terms in public discourse
Deux formes de féminisation des noms en '-eur' semblent entrer en compétition...	Two feminized forms of nouns ending in '-eur' seem to be in competition...	Unresolved linguistic variation reflecting contested gender norms
La forme 'écrivaine' se répand dans l'usage sans pour autant s'imposer.	The form 'écrivaine' is spreading in usage without yet becoming established.	Ambivalence toward female-authored identity in literary domain
Les formes féminines en '-esse' [...] sont en train de disparaître [...] car elles constituent une marque jugée excessive...	Feminine forms ending in '-esse' are disappearing because they are seen as excessive marks of gender.	Rejection of older feminized forms as ideologically marked
Ces mots sont entrés naturellement dans l'usage et l'Académie les a enregistrés...	These words have naturally entered usage and the Académie has recorded them.	Institutional passivity in response to external social change

Source: Author's own elaboration.

DOI: 10.2478/doc-2025-0021

Zübeyde Yaraş

Educational Management, Hatay Mustafa Kemal University, Turkey

zubeyde.yaras@mku.edu.tr

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6510-2655

Seda Gündüzalp

Educational Management, Munzur University, Turkey

sedagunduzalp@munzur.edu.tr

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3546-5644

Quality Culture and Impact
Dynamics in Educational
Institutions: A Qualitative
Analysis Based on
the Experiences of School
Administrators

Article history:**Received** 25 April 2025**Revised** 25 September 2025**Accepted** 25 September 2025**Available online** 16 December 2025

Abstract: This study highlights the role of leadership in shaping quality processes within educational institutions, focusing on the development of a quality culture in schools in the K-12 system (from kindergarten to 12th grade). It explores the connection between leadership discourse and organizational transformation. Using a qualitative, phenomenological design, the study involved 22 school principals from preschool to high school, selected through purposive sampling. Data collected through semi-structured forms were analyzed using content analysis. Findings show that school leaders believe quality processes positively influence instructional quality, student development, organizational success, and culture. Leadership communication, shared values, and stakeholder involvement were seen as key to embedding quality in school functions. The study emphasizes the importance of quality culture in areas such as management processes, teaching practices, human resources, and quality control. Strategies like reward systems, promoting innovation, and effective talent management were identified as essential for fostering a quality culture. Challenges faced by administrators in this process were also revealed. To overcome these, suggestions include using positive reinforcement and offering training in quality management. Overall, the study integrates theoretical perspectives on leadership with practical insights into communication and strategy, concluding that a strong quality culture has a significant impact on educational policy.

Keywords: quality, quality culture, educational policies, school administrators

Introduction

As education systems undergo significant changes in response to increasing demands driven by socio-economic, technological, and cultural transformations, they are increasingly becoming a “product” associated with multiple stakeholders. These changes and transformations, accelerated by the effects of globalization and digital technologies (Moravec & Martínez-Bravo, 2023), have led educational stakeholders to demand greater satisfaction and higher expectations from schools. This change also necessitates a re-examination of how quality is communicated, negotiated, and institutionalized in the organizational discourse of schools. This demand compels educational institutions to achieve a certain level of quality through evaluations, accreditations, rankings, and ratings, and to improve outcomes in order to gain a competitive advantage by becoming more efficient, effective, and student/parent-oriented. As a result, an environment has emerged where emphasis is placed on quality rather than on merely quantitative growth, such as the number of schools or student enrolment. In this changing environment, school principals are emerging as key figures who not only drive organizational change but also play a pivotal role in creating a sustainable culture of quality through symbolic leadership, inclusive dialogue, and strategic communication with all stakeholders. Particularly in higher education, education systems have found themselves in a market-oriented environment in response to increasing demands and pressures from their stakeholders. In this environment, customer satisfaction has come to be seen as the key to long-term survival (Sahney et al., 2008). Consequently, education systems have been forced to undergo deep and rapid changes aimed at improving stakeholder satisfaction (Maguad & Krone, 2012). However, research indicates that the needs of parents and students in terms of customer satisfaction are not sufficiently considered, and there is a lack of participation in decision-making and activities at the school level (Bütün & Aslanargun, 2016). Stakeholder satisfaction necessitates achieving success in education and reaching certain standards, as well as implementing quality processes on a continuous basis. Leadership emerges as an indispensable element in making this process effective and developing a quality culture within organizations. It is emphasized that without the guidance of top management,

quality initiatives are likely to be short-lived, and leadership is considered the driver of strategy implementation (Sallis, 2014). Leadership significantly influences the quality of education and is linked to successful teaching and learning outcomes, school improvement, and overall educational quality (Akert & Martin, 2012; Crisol-Moya et al., 2020).

In order for leaders in educational institutions to make decisions aimed at developing a quality culture, they need to have a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical foundations of quality management approaches in education (Berry, 1997). In his book investigating the role of leadership in transforming “good” companies into “great” ones, Collins (2001) states that leaders make a critical difference in improving quality. Similarly, Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) emphasize that transformational leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing the educational quality of schools. Leaders’ values, beliefs, and behaviours form the foundation of organizational culture, which, in turn, determines the overall performance and quality of the organization (Schein, 2010; Tienari & Savage, 2024). Leadership involves important roles such as inspiring others and providing them with resources, while also addressing and meeting the needs of all stakeholders—a critical function of leadership. Research shows that leadership is a fundamental variable in successful schools (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Marzano et al., 2005). In this context, the emphasis placed on leadership is consistent with research findings on school improvement. Therefore, leadership is regarded as a key factor in spreading quality processes throughout the school and, consequently, in determining the success of schools.

It is known that the role of leaders in quality management processes affects organizational performance; for instance, transformational leaders enhance the organization’s competitive advantage by successfully implementing quality management systems (Prajogo & Sohal, 2004). Indeed, quality management practices have been noted to enhance employees’ job performance by promoting innovative practices within organizations (Cheah et al., 2022). Since organizations are limited not by their opportunities but by their leaders, the effectiveness of leadership has a positive impact on organizational efficiency or success (Gümüşlüoğlu & İlsev, 2009). Leithwood and Riehl (2003) emphasized that school

leaders have a critical impact in roles such as setting a vision, fostering school culture, managing curricula, and supporting teachers, while also stating that leadership improves the overall performance and quality of schools. According to Sharma et al. (2016), drawing from Mohammad Mosadeghrad (2006), improving quality in higher education depends largely on the organization's ability to create a culture of change, which is greatly influenced by the effectiveness of leadership.

The functions and duties set to promote and sustain quality in education largely fall under the responsibility of school and school leadership management (Aspin et al., 1994). Various findings proving the impact of leadership on improving quality in organizations demonstrate that leaders play a critical role in quality management and significantly enhance organizational performance (Daft, 2020; Dahlgaard & Dahlgaard-Park, 2006; Goetsch & Davis, 2021; Northouse, 2018; Taş & Aksu, 2011). The visionary, motivating, and supportive roles of leaders have a decisive effect on quality management and overall performance in organizations (Akpapere et al., 2019; Aksu, 2010; Amtu et al., 2021; Barbosa et al., 2017; Jackson & Marriott, 2012; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Yarkin, 2007).

It has been identified that academic studies focusing on quality processes in educational institutions have mostly concentrated on higher education institutions (Ataman & Adıgüzel, 2019; Balcı, 1998; Belenli et al., 2011; Gümüş, 2018; Güney, 2019; Hamutoğlu et al., 2020; Kalaycı, 2008; Özer et al., 2011; Özen, 2022; Şimşek et al., 2019; Yıldırım & Yenipinar, 2022; Taştan & Yılmaz, 2022; Tezsürücü & Bursalıoğlu, 2013; Toprak et al., 2016), whereas studies addressing other educational levels are limited (Aksu, 2010; Bozdoğan, 2019; Güleröğlu, 2005). From this perspective, this study aims to emphasize the impact of leadership on quality processes in educational institutions while contributing to filling the gap in the literature on educational institutions other than higher education.

In this regard, the research seeks to answer the following questions from the perspective of school principals:

- 1) What does “quality” mean?
- 2) What are the opinions on the necessity of establishing a “quality culture” in schools?

- 3) What strategies should be determined to establish a quality culture in schools?
- 4) What are the obstacles, problems, and solutions encountered in the process of establishing a quality culture?
- 5) Is there a determining impact of quality culture in shaping educational policies?

These questions are explored to fulfil the study's objective.

Conceptual Framework

Quality

Quality is a philosophy focused on systematically improving organizational performance and processes to consistently meet customer expectations and requirements and enhance satisfaction (Langabeer II, 2018). It can be said that the precursors of the concept of quality are rooted in the industrial processes of the 19th century, where standardization, conformity, and mass production became norms. These processes spread from Britain to Germany, France, much of Western Europe, and the United States, particularly under the influence of 'Fordism' in the early 20th century (Hounshell, 1984; Nye, 1990). Modern understandings of quality also emerged in the context of Japan's industrial renewal after World War II (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2010). As Japan prioritized quality to rebuild its economy, W. Edwards Deming and Joseph Juran became prominent figures in the field of quality management in Japan and later globally. Deming is known for his philosophy of process control and continuous improvement, while Juran is recognized for his broader approach to quality management, known as the "Juran Quality Trilogy". Ishikawa, by introducing the concept of "Quality Circles" aimed to encourage worker participation in quality improvement processes (Aktan, 2012). However, in post-industrial knowledge societies, especially in educational settings, quality has evolved from a technical standard to a culturally embedded discourse. It is now jointly

constructed by educational actors through the creation of shared meaning, collaboration, and dialogue.

In the 1980s, quality management, under the name Total Quality Management (TQM), began to be widely adopted in the United States and Europe. During this period, Philip Crosby, with his principle that “quality is free”, argued that investing in quality reduces costs and increases profitability in the long run (Crosby, 1979). Today, TQM is applied not only in the manufacturing sector but also in various fields such as the service sector, public administration, and education. Methodologies such as ISO 9000 standards, Six Sigma, benchmarking, core competencies, lean production, and outsourcing have emerged as new approaches to enhance the effectiveness of TQM (ISO, 2015). It is important to note that Total Quality Management is a comprehensive management approach that integrates strategic, human resources, and performance-focused dimensions with process improvements like reengineering and continuous improvement (Kaizen), all underpinned by a commitment to ethics and responsibility (Aktan, 2012).

Quality in Education and Leadership

While this approach has broad applications, its adaptation to the educational sector has become a priority topic in contemporary research. Indeed, various studies are conducted to understand the conceptualization, evaluation, and measurement of quality in education (Harvey & Green, 1993; Tam, 2001). To understand quality management in education, it is necessary to view an educational system as a combination of subsystems and processes that include inputs, processes, and outputs. Inputs include factors related to students, teachers, administrative staff, physical facilities, and infrastructure, while processes cover teaching, learning, and management activities. Outputs encompass exam results, employment, earnings, and satisfaction. Research has shown that students' academic success is directly related to teachers' pedagogical competencies and ongoing professional development activities (Golob, 2012). Since different parts of a system must work together to produce a synergistic effect that results in customer and stakeholder satisfaction (Sahney et al., 2008), the elements within an educational system also need to be managed holistically. Quality in educational systems is

a multi-dimensional concept that includes the objectives of education, students, parents, infrastructure, teachers, curriculum, pedagogy, standards, and learning outcomes (Sarangapani, 2018). Cheng and Tam (1997), with their process model analyzing quality in education, see quality as an intrinsic process of transformation.

When examining the impact of quality processes on success in education, an effective example is the Brazosport Independent School District (ISD) in Texas, USA, a district that successfully applied quality management philosophy, tools, and methods. The approach implemented here aims to improve student achievement through system alignment and improvements in instructional processes. Brazosport ISD, which includes a school that won the Texas Quality Award in 1998, achieved greater equity and higher student performance by using quality management approaches in its educational transformation process. The district offers an educational model that enhances student performance by restructuring its goals and processes to ensure the success of every student (Goldberg & Cole, 2002).

Achieving quality in education is possible through the effective management of all dimensions related to quality processes. In this context, leadership skills come to the forefront as school administrators play a significant role in applying and developing Total Quality Management (TQM) in schools (Taş & Aksu, 2011). Leaders are regarded as those directly responsible for the development of a quality culture through their abilities to manage resources effectively, clarify roles and responsibilities, establish networks, and optimize human and process management (Poerwanti et al., 2021).

Leaders play an essential role by inspiring those around them, providing the necessary resources for employees to fulfill their duties, and identifying and meeting the expectations and needs of all stakeholders. It is emphasized that leaders enhance motivation by creating a vision and inspiring their followers while also supporting them in achieving goals by providing the necessary resources (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2018). Deming (1986) emphasizes the critical role of leaders in improving quality, highlighting their responsibilities to create vision, motivate employees, and encourage continuous improvement. Leadership has also been proven to be a key variable in successful schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Marzano et al., 2005). In

this context, the emphasis on leadership in quality processes and research is important, as it aligns with findings from studies on school improvement processes (Harris, 2004; Robinson et al., 2008); this transformation also reflects the change in the “creation of quality through dialogue” in schools and emphasizes the impact of leadership narratives, symbols, and routines in strengthening quality-focused practices.

Method

Research Design

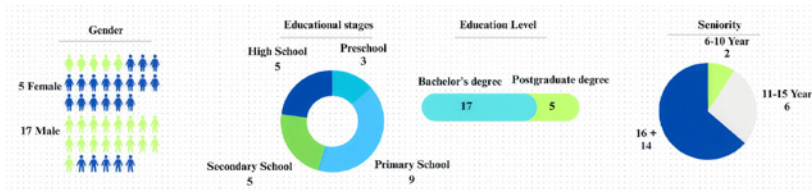
This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design. In phenomenology, meaning is hidden within human existence, or more specifically, in the essence of individuals' lived experiences (Diekelmann, 2005; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014). The purpose of this study, utilizing a phenomenological design, is to reveal the perceptions of school administrators working in primary and secondary education levels, who play significant roles in establishing a quality culture in schools. Additionally, the study aims to provide a detailed and in-depth understanding of the processes that influence their thoughts on educational policies and their leadership behaviours in this context.

Study Group

The study group consists of 22 school principals working at the preschool, primary, middle, and high school levels. In phenomenological studies, the study group typically includes 5 to 25 participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). However, qualitative research focuses more on the adequacy of the study group rather than generalizability (Bowen, 2008). Participants can be added to the study group until data saturation is reached. Data saturation is a crucial criterion in qualitative research, as it signifies when interviews can be concluded (Namey et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). The interviews with school principals were completed when responses

no longer varied, indicating that data saturation had been achieved. Figure 1 presents the demographic data of the study group.

Figure 1. Demographic Information of the Study Group



Source: Developed by the Authors.

Data Collection and Analysis

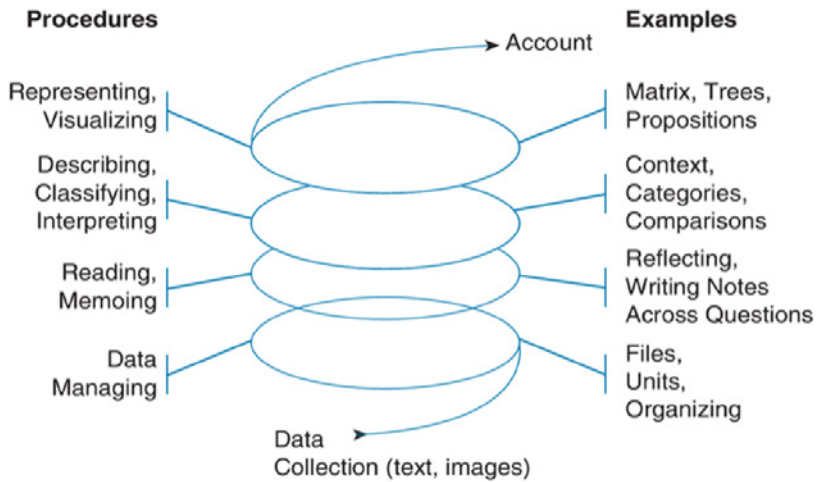
In this study, data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are considered an effective data collection method for phenomenologically based research (Maxwell, 2018; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The interview process aims to uncover the participants' experiences and perceptions related to the phenomenon, with the researcher adopting a listener role. Participants are encouraged to reflect in detail on the questions posed, and efforts are made to accurately interpret their experiences (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

A semi-structured interview form consisting of five questions was prepared by the researchers. This method allows researchers to pose both standard questions and reflective queries, enabling them to further elaborate on participants' views or clarify their perspectives (Charmaz, 2006; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The semi-structured interview form comprises two sections. The first section includes questions aimed at collecting demographic data from the participants. The second section contains five questions designed to elicit detailed and in-depth insights into school administrators' perceptions of quality culture and the processes that influence their thoughts on established educational policies and their leadership behaviours.

In qualitative research, internet-based applications can be utilized for interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2009). In this study, online interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis and completed within a two-week timeframe. All participants consented to audio and video recording during the interviews. The average duration of each interview was 14 minutes, with a total interview time of 303 minutes recorded. The interview forms were coded according to the participants. The coding for school administrators was denoted as “Y”, along with a number corresponding to the order of the interview and the participant’s gender. The final coding format was structured as “Y1-M, Y2-F, Y3-F...”.

The data obtained in the study were analysed using the content analysis method. Content analysis allows for a detailed and systematic examination of the content to identify patterns and themes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 24, a qualitative data analysis software. To ensure that the data analysis process was systematically followed, the data analysis spiral developed by Creswell (2013: 226) was employed, as illustrated in Figure 2. The first stage involved organizing the data. In this phase, audio recordings were transcribed into text, converting all interview recordings into electronic documents. In the second stage, the document was read by the researchers to ensure comprehension. Following this verification, the data document was uploaded to MAXQDA 24 software.

In the third stage, researchers developed codes, categories, and themes based on the data. Finally, in the last stage, the codes and categories related to the identified themes were visualized and reported using MAXQDA 24.

Figure 2. The Data Analysis Spiral

Source: Creswell, 2013: 226.

Validity and Reliability

In this study, a data collection instrument was developed based on a review of similar research, leading to the creation of an interview form draft. This draft was evaluated by two field experts and one language expert, and after incorporating their suggestions, the final version of the interview form was established. To enhance the credibility of the findings, several measures were taken. While transferability (the applicability of findings to other contexts) is not a primary goal in this type of qualitative study, we have provided a detailed description of the study group and its context. This allows readers to assess the potential relevance of the findings to their own settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; as cited in Sharts-Hopko, 2002). Furthermore, the adequacy of the participant sample was ensured not by its size, but by the depth and richness of the data obtained, confirming that the research topic was comprehensively explored from the participants' perspectives (Morse et al., 2002). In this context, the participants in the study were determined using the maximum variation sampling method, a purposive sampling technique. The study group included

school administrators who had received professional training related to quality processes across preschool, primary, middle, and high school levels. Furthermore, a pilot implementation was conducted with three school administrators just before the interview process commenced. No issues were noted during the pilot study, and the interview form was deemed ready for implementation. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with necessary information to ensure they could express their views candidly within a supportive dialogue.

To prevent data loss, audio and video recordings of the interviews were made with the participants' consent. After the interviews, participants were contacted to confirm their statements, ensuring accuracy in the data. To enhance the consistency of the data, direct quotations from participants were incorporated.

In this study, the "Agreement Percentage = $\text{Agreement} / (\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement}) \times 100$ " formula developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was utilized, with the results presented in Table 1. According to these data, the reliability rate of the study was calculated as "Agreement Percentage = $65 / (65 + 5) \times 100 = 92.85$ ". An inter-coder agreement of 80% or higher is considered necessary for internal consistency (Patton, 2002). Thus, the obtained agreement percentage indicates that the internal consistency of the data is sufficient.

Table 1. Inter-Coder Agreement Data

	CODER				Total Codes
	Agreement		Disagreement		
	A	B	A	B	
Question 1	15		-	-	15
Question 2	10		-	1	11
Question 3	16		1	-	17
Question 4	15		2	-	17
Question 5	9		-	1	10
Total Agreement	65		Total Disagreement	5	70

Source: Developed by the Authors.

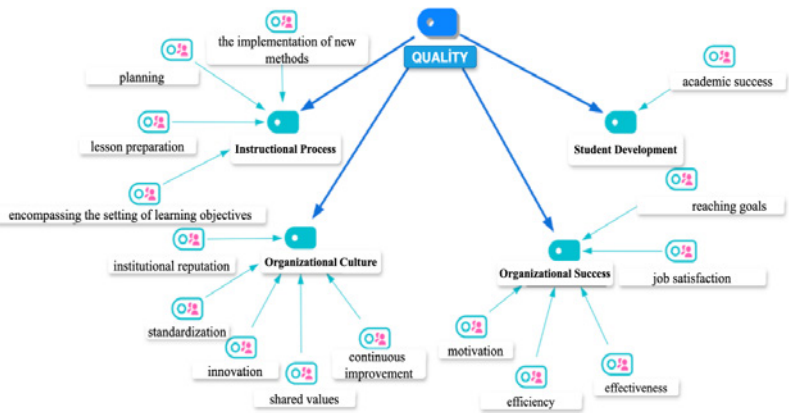
Findings

This section presents the findings obtained from the qualitative analysis of school administrators' experiences. To enhance clarity and focus, the findings are structured around the five main research questions that guided this study. Each research question is presented as a main heading, followed by a detailed analysis of the administrators' responses and illustrative quotations.

Research question 1: What does “quality” mean?

To answer the first research question, “What does ‘quality’ mean to you? How would you explain this concept based on your experiences?”, an analysis of the school administrators' responses revealed a multifaceted understanding of ‘quality’ in educational settings. While no single definition emerged, administrators consistently described quality through four interconnected dimensions: (1) instructional processes, (2) student development, (3) organizational success, and (4) organizational culture. The key categories derived from their definitions are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Code Map Related to the Quality Theme



Source: Developed by the Authors.

The most prominent dimension identified by administrators was instructional processes. They defined quality as the meticulous planning and execution of teaching, from setting clear learning objectives to implementing innovative methods. For instance, one administrator stated, "For me, quality in our school primarily means aiming for excellence in instructional processes. In this context, I believe it is crucial for our teachers to clearly define specific learning objectives while preparing for their lessons..." (Y4). Another administrator reinforced this by linking the achievement rate of these objectives directly to educational quality, emphasizing that "Quality signifies the clear definition of learning objectives set in education and the process by which students are guided to achieve these goals. The rate of achieving learning objectives is directly proportional to our educational quality..." (Y8). The preparatory stages, such as lesson planning and material design, were also highlighted as foundational to a quality educational experience:

Quality means meticulously carrying out the lesson preparation process in education. Lesson preparation involves our teachers planning their instructional materials, teaching strategies, and in-class activities in advance. This preparation process ensures that lessons proceed more smoothly and effectively... (Y14)

While I find it challenging to provide a single definition of quality, when considered, it means effectively managing the planning process in education. Good planning enables our teachers to manage their classes more efficiently and allows students to gain the best learning experiences. Preparing weekly and monthly lesson plans ensures the instructional process progresses regularly and smoothly... (Y16)

The second category, student development, was frequently framed in terms of academic success. As one administrator succinctly put it, "I evaluate quality from the perspective of student development. Therefore, when I think of quality, I consider maximizing our students' academic achievements..." (Y2). This view positions student outcomes as a primary indicator of institutional quality.

Third, administrators associated quality with tangible markers of organizational success, such as increased motivation, efficiency, effectiveness, reaching goals, and job satisfaction. One participant articulated this connection by stating, “I believe that adopting quality processes has a positive effect on increasing teachers’ job satisfaction. From what I’ve observed, embracing quality processes motivates my teachers and enables them to work more efficiently. Therefore, I can summarize quality as motivation, efficiency, and job satisfaction...” (Y13). This suggests that for administrators, a quality environment is one where operational effectiveness and a positive work atmosphere are mutually reinforcing.

Finally, the concept of quality was deeply embedded in organizational culture. Administrators linked it to the school’s institutional reputation, the establishment of clear standards (standardization), a commitment to innovation, shared values, and a philosophy of continuous improvement. One participant noted that quality processes facilitated management and elevated overall quality: “Thanks to quality processes, all operations become defined, replacing a variable work approach with institutional standards. I see this situation as significantly facilitating our management processes and elevating quality to a serious degree...” (Y5). Another key cultural aspect was the philosophy of continuous improvement, which was seen as a proactive approach to achieving educational goals. As one administrator explained,

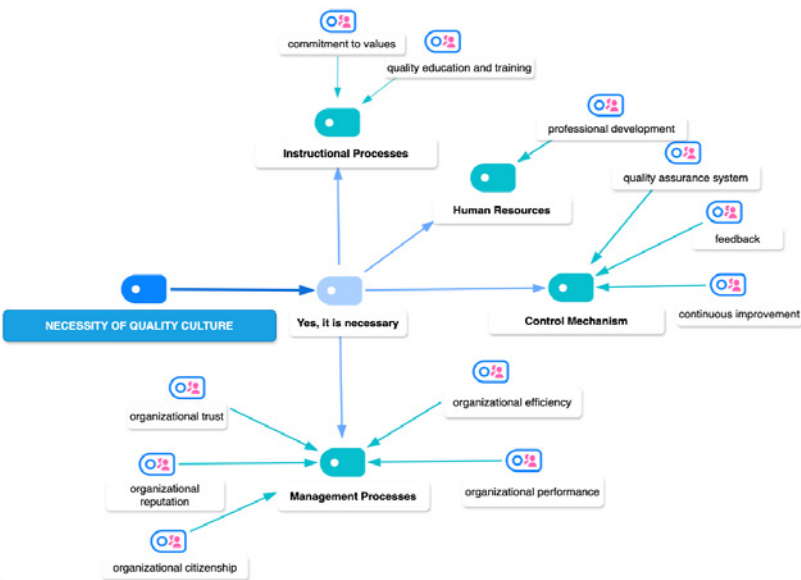
: I can define quality based on the philosophy of continuous improvement.
 : Building on the quality management training I received in the past, I believe
 : that as long as we operate within the continuous improvement philosophy,
 : we can minimize obstacles on the path to achieving our educational goals
 : and managerial success. In our school, we regularly conduct evaluation
 : meetings based on the understanding of continuous improvement, allowing
 : us to promptly identify our shortcomings... (Y6).

In summary, the school administrators’ definitions of quality transcend simple metrics, painting a holistic picture where effective instructional processes, positive student development, overall organizational success, and a proactive, improvement-oriented organizational culture are all essential components.

Research Question 2: What are the opinions on the necessity of establishing a “quality culture” in schools?

To explore the second research question, “Do you believe it is necessary to establish a ‘quality culture’ in your institution? Can you explain your reasoning?”, the responses from school administrators were unanimously affirmative. They justified this necessity by highlighting its positive impact on four key areas of school operations: (1) management processes, (2) instructional processes, (3) human resources, and (4) the establishment of quality assurance mechanisms. The themes emerging from their reasoning are detailed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Code Map Related to the Necessity of Quality Culture



Source: Developed by the Authors.

Firstly, administrators argued that a quality culture is fundamental to strengthening management processes. They explained that such a culture improves organizational health by fostering trust, encouraging proactive citizenship behaviors, and boosting overall efficiency. One administrator

emphasized the role of trust, stating, “I think that ensuring trust within the organization is essential for creating a sustainable quality culture. With a quality culture, a climate of trust will develop among all employees in the school, thereby enhancing our success in administrative processes” (Y6). Another linked it to staff commitment, predicting that “a sense of organizational citizenship will develop within the school, fostering a search for responsibility, taking on responsibilities, and a spirit of teamwork” (Y2). Furthermore, it was seen as “a significant variable that increases the efficiency of the school” (Y10).

Secondly, a quality culture was seen as essential for reinforcing the core instructional processes. This was primarily linked to strengthening a commitment to shared values, which supports both the academic and social development of students. As one participant explained,

Creating a quality culture strengthens commitment to values within the instructional processes. In our school, emphasizing not only the academic curriculum but also ethical and moral values supports our students' academic and social development. Values form the common language and understanding of our school community. Instilling these values in our students enables them to exhibit positive behaviors both within and outside the school (Y3).

Furthermore, the necessity of a quality culture was connected to the development of human resources, specifically through a commitment to professional development. This view was clearly articulated by an administrator who noted, “As part of our quality culture, we place great importance on the professional development of our teachers. We aim to conduct awareness training in our school by forming working groups with our teachers who are engaged in this field...” (Y11), indicating that such a culture institutionalizes continuous learning for the staff.

Finally, administrators viewed a quality culture as necessary for establishing robust quality assurance mechanisms. These systems rely on systematic feedback and a philosophy of continuous improvement. For example, one administrator described their process: “An important component of our quality culture is effective feedback mechanisms. We regularly collect feedback from our teachers, students, and parents. This feedback helps us evaluate our educational

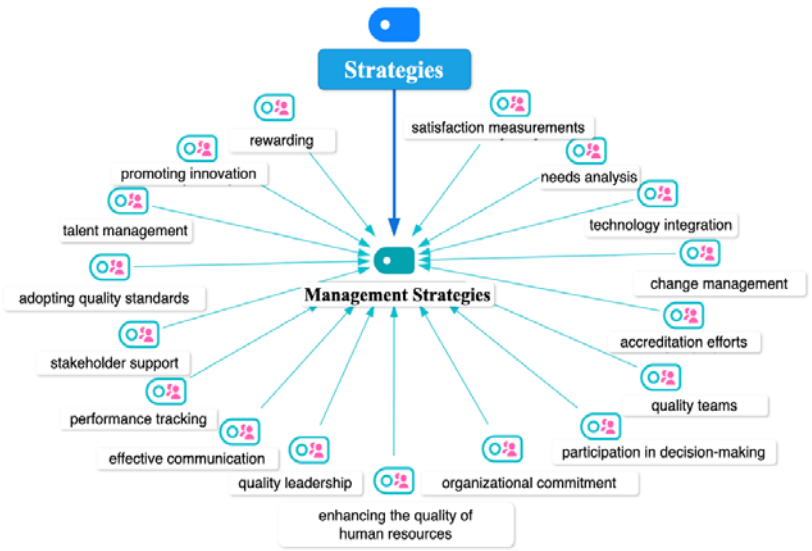
processes and make the necessary adjustments” (Y8). This demonstrates a shift from top-down inspection to a collaborative cycle of evaluation and refinement.

In essence, school administrators perceive a quality culture not as an abstract ideal, but as a practical necessity for improving all facets of school life, from management and teaching to staff development and institutional self-evaluation.

Research Question 3: What strategies should be determined to establish a quality culture in schools?

When asked the third research question, “What strategies do you identify to establish a quality culture? Could you explain?”, school administrators identified a wide range of interconnected management strategies. Rather than a single solution, they described a comprehensive approach requiring action on multiple fronts. These diverse strategies, all listed in Figure 5, can be organized into three overarching categories: (1) People-Centered Strategies, (2) System and Process-Oriented Strategies, and (3) Dynamic Leadership Strategies.

Figure 5. Code Map Obtained for the Strategy Theme



Source: Developed by the Authors.

The most frequently mentioned category was People-Centered Strategies, which focus on empowering and motivating staff and students. Administrators emphasized the importance of strategies such as fostering organizational commitment, enhancing human resources, and creating quality teams. A key tactic within this area is rewarding, which was seen as a direct driver of motivation and performance. As one administrator stated, “I prioritize the rewarding strategy for the establishment of a quality culture. Recognizing and rewarding the achievements of our teachers and students enhances motivation, leading to higher performance” (Y19-E). Another crucial strategy was ensuring participation in decision-making, which was linked to building commitment. One participant explained, “Establishing a quality culture is a process that takes time. I strive to create a shared commitment to common goals in line with our school’s vision and mission. I believe that involving our teachers in decision-making processes will also increase their commitment to the school” (Y13-E).

The second category involves System and Process-Oriented Strategies, which aim to create a clear and consistent framework for quality. Administrators identified the need to adopt formal quality standards and pursue accreditation efforts as ways to institutionalize excellence. This category also includes systematic approaches like performance tracking, conducting regular needs analyses, and using satisfaction measurements to gather data for continuous improvement. These strategies ensure that the pursuit of quality is not arbitrary but is based on evidence and standardized procedures.

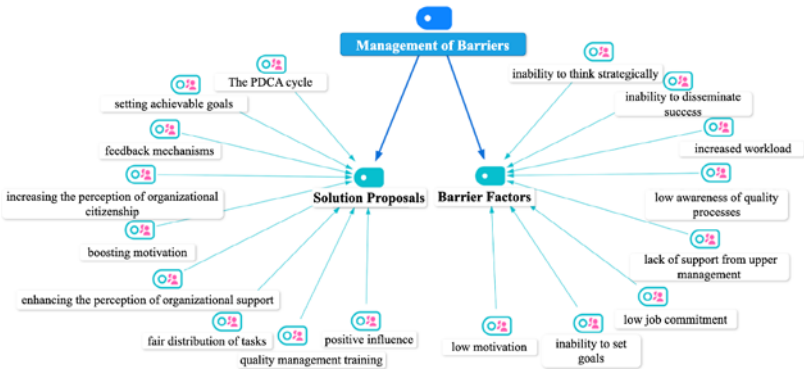
Finally, administrators highlighted a set of Dynamic Leadership Strategies that are essential for driving and sustaining change. This includes demonstrating quality leadership, ensuring effective communication, and managing the process of change management itself. Furthermore, they pointed to the importance of promoting innovation, securing stakeholder support, and leveraging technology integration as critical levers for building and maintaining a vibrant quality culture in the 21st century.

In conclusion, the administrators’ perspectives indicate that establishing a quality culture is not achieved through a simple checklist but requires a holistic and integrated strategy. Success depends on simultaneously investing in people, building robust systems, and providing visionary and adaptive leadership.

Research Question 4: What are the obstacles, problems, and solutions encountered in the process of establishing a quality culture?

The fourth research question explored the “obstacles, problems, and solutions encountered in the process of establishing a quality culture”. The analysis of administrators’ responses revealed a clear duality, for nearly every identified problem, they also articulated a corresponding solution, detailed in Figure 6, can be broadly categorized into human/cultural factors and organizational/systemic factors.

Figure 6. Code Map Obtained for the Theme of Management of Barriers



Source: Developed by the Authors.

The primary set of obstacles was human and cultural in nature, stemming from staff attitudes and perceptions. Administrators identified low motivation, low job commitment, and a low awareness of quality processes as significant problems. A key concern was potential resistance from teachers, who might perceive quality initiatives as simply an “increased workload”. As one administrator noted, “I think a potential barrier could be the teachers in the institution not being receptive to the situation. Teachers may be unwilling in this regard because they believe it will increase their workload” (Y2o-E).

To counteract these human-centered problems, administrators proposed a suite of corresponding solutions. To address low motivation and commitment,

they suggested strategies to boost motivation and enhance the perception of organizational support. To combat low awareness and resistance, they recommended providing targeted quality management training and fostering a sense of shared purpose to increase the perception of organizational citizenship. These solutions aim to transform resistance into engagement by focusing on professional growth and support.

The second set of problems was organizational and systemic. These included a lack of support from upper management, the inability to set clear goals, and a failure to disseminate success throughout the organization. These systemic issues can undermine even the most well-intentioned quality initiatives.

In response, administrators offered clear systemic solutions. The most powerful strategy mentioned was to create a culture of continuous improvement through effective feedback mechanisms and the implementation of frameworks like the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle. They also emphasized the importance of setting achievable goals to build momentum and ensuring a fair distribution of tasks to prevent burnout. As one administrator wisely advised, “Avoiding unattainable goals will also be beneficial. Additionally, attributing every successful step to the entire staff of the institution will serve as a stepping stone to overcome barriers” (Y9-E). This strategy directly addresses the “inability to disseminate success” by making recognition a collective and motivating force.

In essence, school administrators view the path to a quality culture as a continuous process of navigating challenges. Their responses show that finding solutions is not about addressing isolated problems, but about strategically pairing human-centered and systemic solutions to the specific obstacles that arise.

Research Question 5: Is there a determining impact of quality culture in shaping educational policies?

The final research question addressed whether a school-level quality culture has a determining impact on the formulation of broader educational policies. When asked, “Do you believe that the quality culture has a decisive effect on the formulation of educational policies?”, administrators expressed a strong

consensus. They argued that a robust quality culture is not merely an internal school affair but a crucial driver that should inform and shape policy-making at a higher level. Their views suggest this impact manifests in two primary domains: (1) shaping instructional and curricular policies, and (2) guiding human resources and leadership policies. The specific areas of influence are detailed in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Code Map Obtained for the Theme of The Effect on The Formulation of Educational Policies



Source: Developed by the Authors.

Primarily, a quality culture was seen as a vital source of feedback for shaping instructional and curricular policies. Administrators explained that the data and insights generated within a quality-focused school—such as the effective identification of learning losses—provide a realistic basis for determining educational goals and developing relevant course content. This grassroots information helps ensure that policies are grounded in the actual needs of schools and students. One administrator described it as a “guiding principle”, stating, “Quality culture is a guiding principle in the development of educational policies. I believe it creates a comprehensive roadmap across all aspects of education, especially for minimizing learning losses” (Y14-E). This suggests that a quality culture helps bridge the gap between policy-making and classroom reality.

Secondly, administrators asserted that a quality culture should directly influence human resources and leadership policies, particularly concerning appointments and professional standards. They argued that a commitment to quality should be a prerequisite for both teachers and managers, thus impacting teacher and management appointment policies. This focus on personnel is seen as essential for ensuring the “continuity of development” within the education system. This perspective was clearly articulated by an administrator who said, “I think it has a direct impact on educational policies. In my view, quality culture ensures the continuity of development. A quality-focused approach influences employment and appointment policies to enhance the effectiveness of education...” (Y17-E).

In summary, the school administrators do not view quality culture as an isolated, school-level phenomenon. Instead, they perceive it as a fundamental engine for systemic improvement, capable of providing the evidence and impetus needed to formulate more effective, responsive, and impactful educational policies at a macro level.

Discussion

This study examined how school administrators in the Turkish educational context perceive, implement, and cope with the challenges of establishing a culture of quality. The findings reveal a holistic and practitioner-oriented understanding of quality that goes beyond mere measurement to encompass instructional, organizational, and cultural dimensions. This section discusses key findings related to the existing literature and highlights implications for both theory and practice in this specific context.

1. The Multifaceted Nature of Quality: A Holistic View in a Centralized System

The first major finding was that school administrators define ‘quality’ not through a single lens, but as a complex interplay of effective instructional processes, positive student development, overall organizational success, and a proactive

organizational culture. This holistic view strongly aligns with the core tenets of Total Quality Management adapted for education, which argue that genuine quality must be embedded in the daily processes and values of the institution (Goetsch & Davis, 2014; Sallis, 2014). Interestingly, while the Turkish education system is often driven by centralized, high-stakes examination results, the administrators in this study advocated for a much broader definition of success. This suggests a desire among practitioners to move beyond quantifiable metrics and cultivate a more comprehensive form of institutional excellence.

2. The Principal as the Architect: Leadership in a Hierarchical Culture

A recurring theme throughout the findings was the central role of the school administrator in driving a quality culture. This supports a significant body of literature that positions school leaders as the primary architects of quality (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Díez et al., 2020). However, our study extends this understanding by detailing the specific levers administrators believe they must pull: from fostering “organizational citizenship” to ensuring “fair distribution of tasks”. This emphasis on the principal’s direct role may reflect the hierarchical nature of the Turkish educational context, where leadership is often less distributed. While contemporary models advocate for distributed leadership (Harris, 2013), our findings suggest that in this context, it is the transformational leadership actions of the formal principal that are perceived as the most critical catalyst for change (Jung et al., 2003).

3. Overcoming Barriers: The Primacy of the Human Factor

The study also illuminated the duality of barriers and solutions. While systemic issues like “lack of upper management support” were noted, it was the human and cultural factors—such as low motivation and resistance to an “increased workload”—that were most prominent. An unexpected finding was the relative lack of emphasis on financial constraints, a commonly cited barrier in other studies. This suggests that for these administrators, winning the “hearts and minds” of their staff is a more immediate and significant challenge than securing

material resources. Their proposed solutions, which pair human-centered strategies (e.g., “quality management training”) with systemic ones (e.g., “PDCA cycle”), echo the core arguments of change management theory: that successful change requires addressing both the cultural and structural dimensions of an organization (Kotter, 1996; Yukl, 2013). Supporting this perspective, Jentsch and König (2022) emphasize that the increased teacher competencies associated with professional development positively influence student success, thereby enabling schools to achieve their established learning objectives at a high rate. Furthermore, for proposed solutions, factors such as positive influence, quality management training, fair task distribution, enhancement of perceived organizational support, boosting motivation, increasing the perception of organizational citizenship, establishing feedback mechanisms, setting attainable goals, and applying the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle have been identified. Ultimately, quality management necessitates a specific leadership style described as “transformational leadership” (Spanbauer, 1992).

4. From School-Level Culture to System-Level Policy: A Call for a Bottom-Up Dialogue

Perhaps the most significant finding is the administrators’ belief that a school-level quality culture should be a key driver of broader educational policy. In a traditionally top-down system, this represents a powerful call for a more symbiotic, bottom-up dialogue. Their assertion that grassroots insights on “identifying learning losses” or “teacher appointment policies” should inform macro-level decisions echoes the call by Saiti (2012) for more evidence-based policy. It also provides a practical counterpoint to the top-down agency models discussed by Garwe (2014), suggesting that for national quality assurance to be effective, it must actively listen to and learn from the practitioners it aims to support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this qualitative analysis reveals that for Turkish school administrators, a culture of quality is not an externally imposed program, but rather a holistic and internally developed environment. It requires visionary leadership that skillfully balances the needs of people with the demands of systems. The study confirms that creating a strong quality culture is not merely a management task but a transformative leadership effort that can make educational institutions more harmonious, effective, and responsive.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable information, its limitations must be acknowledged. First, its qualitative nature means that the findings are context-dependent and do not aim to provide statistical generalizations. Second, the sample was drawn from managers in Istanbul, and their perspectives may not reflect those in other geographical or socioeconomic regions of Turkey. Third, the study relies solely on managers' perspectives; including the views of teachers, students, and parents would provide a more comprehensive, 360-degree understanding. Finally, the use of interviews as the sole data collection method could be complemented by classroom observations or document analysis in future research to triangulate findings.

Implications

The findings of this study have various practical and theoretical implications:

Implications for Practice: We suggest that school administrators seeking to create a quality culture begin by forming a “coalition of the willing” consisting of effective teachers who will support the process. To alleviate fears of increased workload, administrators should model fairness and transparency in the distribution of tasks. Furthermore, providing ongoing and relevant professional development is not an optional extra, but a fundamental strategy for building capacity and commitment.

Policy Implications: Policymakers should consider establishing formal feedback channels through which high-performing schools can share best practices and data to inform regional and national policy. The “School Development Plans” guidelines could be revised to explicitly promote a balanced approach that combines both the human-centered and systemic strategies identified in this study. Implications for Future Research: Building on the limitations of this study, future research could conduct comparative studies between urban and rural schools to examine contextual differences. A longitudinal study tracking the implementation of quality strategies over several years would provide invaluable data on their long-term effectiveness. Finally, a mixed-methods study could quantify the relationship between the perceptions of quality culture described here and measurable student outcomes.

This study emphasizes that the pursuit of quality in education is an extremely human endeavor. This study is managed by determined individuals who navigate complex systems to create environments where both students and staff are empowered to succeed.

Disclosure

During the writing process of this paper, an artificial intelligence tool was used as a writing assistant, particularly in the following stages: (1) improving the grammar and style of the English text, (2) making the paragraphs more fluent and logical, and (3) integrating the changes suggested during the peer review process into the text. The original ideas, qualitative analysis, findings, and final conclusions of the study are entirely the author's own work, and no text generated by artificial intelligence has been directly used.

References

Akert, N., & Martin, B. (2012). The role of teacher leaders in school improvement through the perceptions of principals and teachers. *International Journal of Education*, 4(4), 284–299.

Akparep, J., Jengre, E., & Mogre, A. (2019). The influence of leadership style on organizational performance at tumakavi development association, tamale, northern region of Ghana. *Open Journal of Leadership*, 8, 1–22.

Ahsu, A. (2010). Total quality management and visionary leadership in primary schools. *Education and Science*, 34(153), 99–116.

Aktan, C. C. (2012). Total quality management in organizations. *Organizasyon ve Yönetim Bilimleri Dergisi*, 4(2), 249–256.

Amtu, O., Souisa, S. L., Joseph, L. S., & Lumamuly, P. C. (2021). Contribution of leadership, organizational commitment and organizational culture to improve the quality of higher education. *International Journal of Innovation*, 9(1), 131–157.

Aspin, D. N., Chapman, J. D., & Wilkinson, V. R. (1994). *Quality schooling: A pragmatic approach to some current problems*. Topics and Issues, Cassell, London.

Ataman, O., & Adıgüzel, A. (2019). Quality perception in higher education: Sample of Duzce University, *Electronic Journal of Education Sciences*, 8(15), 39–56.

Balcı, A. (1998). Yüksek öğretimde toplam kalite yönetimi ölçeği. *Kuram ve Uygulamada Eğitim Yönetimi*, 15(15), 319–334.

Barbosa, F. M., Gambi, L. D. N., & Gerolamo, M. C. (2017). Leadership and quality management—a correlational study between leadership models and quality management principles. *Gestão & Produção*, 24(3), 438–449.

Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership*. Psychology Press.

Belentli, İ., Günay, D., Öztemel, E., & Demir, A. (2011). Türkiye yükseköğretim kurumları için kalite güvence oluşumu üzerine bir model önerisi. *Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi*, 3, 128–133.

Bendermacher, G., oude Egbrink, M. G., Wolfhagen, I., & Dolmans, D. H. (2017). Unravelling quality culture in higher education: A realist review. *Higher Education*, 73(1), 39–60.

Berry, G. (1997). Leadership and the development of quality culture in schools. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 11(2), 52–64.

Bowen, G. (2008). Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: A research note. *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), 137–142.

Bozdoğan, Z. (2019). 1973–2018 yılları arası Türkiye’de ilköğretimde kaliteye yönelik düzenlemelerin incelenmesi. Master Thesis. İstanbul Sabahattin Zaim University.

Brundrett, M., & Rhodes, C. (2010). *Leadership for quality and accountability in education*. Routledge.

Bütün, H., & Aslanargun, E. (2016). Mesleki ve teknik eğitim kurumlarında toplam kalite yönetimi uygulamalarının değerlendirilmesi. *Anadolu Eğitim Liderliği ve Öğretim Dergisi*, 4(1), 40–57.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.

Cheah, L. F., Cheng, M. Y., & Hen, K. W. (2022). The effect of quality management practices on academics’ innovative performance in Malaysian higher education institutions. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(4), 643–656.

Cheng, Y. C., & Tam, W.M. (1997). Multi-models of quality in education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 5(1), 22–31.

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: why some companies make the leap... And others don't*. Harper Business.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crisol-Moya, E., Romero-López, M. A., & Caurcel-Cara, M. J. (2020). Active methodologies in higher education: Perception and opinion as evaluated by professors and their students in the teaching-learning process. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1703.

Crosby, P. B. (1979). *Quality is free: The art of making quality certain*. McGraw-Hill.

Daft, R. L. (2020). *Organization theory and design* (13th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Dahlgaard, J. J., & Mi Dahlgaard-Park, S. (2006). Lean production, six sigma quality, TQM and company culture. *The TQM magazine*, 18(3), 263–281.

Deming, W. E. (1986). *Out of the Crisis*. MIT Press.

Díez, F., Villa, A., López, A. L., & Iraurgi, I. (2020). Impact of quality management systems in the performance of educational centers: educational policies and management processes. *Heliyon*, 6(4), e03824.

Diekelmann, J. (2005). The retrieval of method. In P. Ironside (Ed.), *Beyond Method: Philosophical Conversations in Healthcare Research and Scholarship* (pp. 3–57). The University of Wisconsin Press.

Garwe, E. C. (2014). The effect of institutional leadership on quality of higher education provision. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 22, 1–10.

Goetsch, D. L., & Davis, S. B. (2021). *Quality management for organizational excellence: Introduction to total quality* (9th ed.). Pearson.

Goldberg, J. S., & Cole, B. R. (2002). Quality management in education: Building excellence and equity in student performance. *Quality Management Journal*, 9(4), 8–22.

Golob, T. (2012). The impact of teacher's professional development on the results of pupils at national assessment of knowledge. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 47, 1648–1654.

Gümüşlüoğlu, L., & İlsev, A. (2009). Transformational leadership, creativity, and organizational innovation. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(4), 461–473.

Güleroğlu, R. (2005). *İlköğretimde toplam kalite yönetimi ve bir araştırma*. Master Thesis. Marmara University.

Gümüş, S. (2018). ABD’de eyalet düzeyindeki yükseköğretim kurullarının incelenmesi ve Türkiye için reform önerileri: Yönetim, kalite güvencesi ve finansman. *Eğitim ve Bilim*, 43(193), 45–61.

Güney, A. (2019). Kalite yönetimi çerçevesinde yükseköğretimde akreditasyon süreci. *Electronic Turkish Studies*, 14(2), 401–412.

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (1998). Exploring the principal's contribution to school effectiveness: 1980–1995. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 9(2), 157–191.

Hamutoğlu, N. B., Ünveren-Bilgiç, E. N., & Elmas, M. (2020). Yükseköğretimde kalite süreçleri: İnsani gelişme endeksi raporlarına göre ülkelerin karşılaştırmalı olarak incelenmesi. *Yükseköğretim Dergisi*, 10(1), 112–124.

Harris, A. (2004). Distributed leadership and school improvement: Leading or misleading? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 32(1), 11–24.

Harvey, L., & Green, D. (1993). Defining quality. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1), 9–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260293930180102>

Hounshell, D. A. (1984). *From the American system to mass production, 1800–1932: The development of manufacturing technology in the United States*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

ISO (2015). *ISO 9000, Quality management systems, Fundamentals and vocabulary*. Retrieved from <https://www.iso.org/standard/45481.html>. Accessed 5 December 2025.

Jackson, K. M., & Marriott, C. (2012). The interaction of principal and teacher instructional influence as a measure of leadership as an organizational quality. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(2), 230–258.

Jentsch, A., & König, J. (2022). Teacher competence and professional development. In *International Handbook of Comparative Large – Scale Studies in Education: Perspectives, Methods and Findings* (pp.1–17). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Jung, D. I., Chow, C., & Wu, A. (2003). The role of transformational leadership in enhancing organizational innovation: Hypotheses and some preliminary findings. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14(4–5), 525–544.

Kalaycı, N. (2008). Yükseköğretimde uygulanan toplam kalite yönetimi sürecinde gözardı edilen unsurlardan “TKY merkezi” ve “Eğitim programları”. *Türk Eğitim Bilimleri Dergisi*, 6(2), 163–188.

Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading change*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Langabeer II, J. R. (2018). *Performance improvement in hospitals and health systems: Managing analytics and quality in healthcare*. Taylor & Francis.

Leedy, P. & Ormrod, J. (2015). *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (11th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organizational conditions and student engagement with school. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 38(2), 112–129.

Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2005). Transformational leadership. In *The Essentials of School Leadership*, edited by Brent Davies. Sage Publications.

Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C. (2003). *What we know about successful school leadership*. Philadelphia, PA: Laboratory for Student Success, Temple University.

Maguad, B. A., & Krone, R. M. (2012). *Managing for quality in higher education*. Bookboon.

Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. ASCD.

Maxwell, J. A. (2018). *Nitel araştırma tasarımı: Etkileşimli bir yaklaşım* (M. Çeviribaş, Çev. Ed.). Nobel Yayıncılık.

MEB (2014). *Milli Eğitim Kalite Çerçevesi*. Retrieved from https://sgb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2024_04/04145846_16110804_meb_kalite_cercevesi.pdf. Accessed 27 November 2025.

Mohammad Mosadeghrad, A. (2006). The impact of organizational culture on the successful implementation of total quality management. *The TQM magazine*, 18(6), 606–625.

Moravec, J. W., & Martínez-Bravo, M. C. (2023). Global trends in disruptive technological change: Social and policy implications for education. *On the Horizon*, 31(3/4), 147–173.

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), 13–22.

Namey, E., Guest, G., McKenna, K., & Chen, M. (2016). Evaluating bang for the buck: A cost-effectiveness comparison between individual interviews and focus groups based on thematic saturation levels. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 37(3), 425–440.

Northouse, P. G. (2018). *Leadership: Theory and practice*. Sage Publications.

Nye, D. E. (1990). *American technological sublime*. MIT Press.

Ogawa, R. T., & Bossert, S. T. (1995). Leadership as an organizational quality. *Educational administration quarterly*, 31(2), 224–243.

Özen, E. (2022). Yükseköğretimde kalite güvencesi ve akreditasyon: Açık ve uzaktan eğitim. *Açıköğretim Uygulamaları ve Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8(1), 87–93.

Özer, M., Gür, B. S., & KüçükCan, T. (2011). Kalite güvencesi: Türkiye yükseköğretimi için stratejik tercihler. *Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi*, 2, 59–65.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. 4th Edition, Sage, Thousand Oaks.

Poerwanti, E., Suwandayani, B. I., & Sombuling, A. (2021). Literacy Skills as an Effort to Maintain Quality Culture in Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Malang City During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Nonformal Education*, 7(1), 8–13.

Prajogo, D. I., & Sohal, A. S. (2004). The multidimensionality of TQM practices in determining quality and innovation performance—an empirical examination. *Technovation*, 24(6), 443–453.

Robinson, V. M. J., Lloyd, C. A., & Rowe, K. J. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(5), 635–674.

Sahney, S., Banwet, D. K., & Karunes, S. (2008). An integrated framework of indices for quality management in education: A faculty perspective. *The TQM journal*, 20(5), 502–519.

Saiti, A. (2012). Leadership and quality management: An analysis of three key features of the Greek education system. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 20(2), 110–138.

Sallis, E. (2014). *Total quality management in education*. Routledge.

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., & Jinks, C. (2018). Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & quantity*, 52(4), 1893–1907.

Sarangapani, P. M. (2018). Notes on quality in education 1. In *School Education in India* (pp. 139–158). Routledge India.

Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

Sharma, S., Amir, S. D. S., Veeriah, J., & Kannan, S. (2016). Üniversite sıralamalarında üst sıralarda bulunan bir üniversitede dekanların liderlik davranışları ve bu davranışların kalite yeterliliği üzerindeki etkisi. *Eğitim ve Bilim*, 41(184), 49–58.

Sharts-Hopko, N. C. (2002). Assessing rigor in qualitative research. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in Aids Care*, 13, 84–86.

Spanbauer, S. J. (1992). *A quality system for education*. ASQC Quality Press, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Starks, H., & Trinidad, S. B. (2007). Choose your method: A comparison of phenomenology, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10), 1372–1380.

Şimşek, H., İslim, Ö. F., & Öztürk, N. (2019). Yükseköğretimde kalite arayışında bir gösterge olarak öğrenci memnuniyeti: Bir ölçek geliştirme çalışması. *Trakya Eğitim Dergisi*, 9(3), 380–395.

Tam, M. (2001). Measuring quality and performance in higher education. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(1), 47–54.

Taş, Y. F., & Aksu, A. (2011). Toplam kalite yönetimi ve stratejik liderlik. *Organizasyon ve Yönetim Bilimleri Dergisi*, 3(2), 351–361.

Taştan, K., & Yılmaz, S. (2022). Kalite yönetimi uyma ölçeğinin yükseköğretim için işlemselleştirilmesi: Yükseköğretimde Kalite Yönetimi Uyma Ölçeği. *Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi*, 12(3), 573–587.

Tezsürücü, D., & Bursalıoğlu, S. A. (2013). Yükseköğretimde değişim: Kalite arayışları. *Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 10(2), 97–108.

Tienari, J., & Savage, P. (2024). Leadership and humor, the Moomin way. *Discourses on Culture*, 22(1), 15–39.

Toprak, M., Us, D., & Şengül, M. (2016). Avrupa yükseköğretim alanında kalite güvencesi standartları ve yönergeleri. *Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi*, 6(1), 123–134.

Yatkin, A. (2007). Toplam kalite yönetiminde liderlik: liderlikte kalite. *ISGUC The Journal of Industrial Relations and Human Resources*, 9(1), 126–147.

Yıldırım, K., & Yenipınar, Ş. (2022). Uluslararası kalite standartlarına uyum: Türk yükseköğretim kurumlarının yönetsel boyutlar açısından değerlendirilmesi. *Eğitim ve Bilim*, 47(211).

Yukl, G. (2013). *Leadership in organizations*. Pearson Education.

Antony Hoyte-West

Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom

antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4410-6520

On Institutional Translation in a Fictional Context: Interdisciplinary Remarks on the Structure and Hierarchy of the Royal Institute of Translation in R. F. Kuang's *Babel*

Article history:

Received	20 October 2025
Revised	03 December 2025
Accepted	03 December 2025
Available online	16 December 2025

Abstract: Employing an interdisciplinary approach from linguistics, literary studies, and translation studies, this article examines the structures and

hierarchies present in the fictional Royal Institute of Translation, the emblematic institution of British imperial power which is the lynchpin of R. F. Kuang's 2022 speculative novel *Babel*. With the work primarily set in a fictional 1830s Oxford where magical translation-based silver bars are the key to colonial dominance, the institutional management of languages and translation unsurprisingly assumes a key role. After contextualising Kuang's towering creation in historical, linguistic, and literary terms, the hierarchy and structure of the Institute is presented and discussed via close reading of a selected excerpt from the novel. This analysis is complemented by relevant observations on the institutional and professional context of translation and interpreting both in historical and in contemporary times.

Keywords: 21st century literature, *Babel*, British Empire, colonialism, institutional translation in fiction

Introduction

Acknowledging the complex interplay of sociopolitical, ethnocultural, and linguistic factors in determining the status and diffusion of a given language or dialect, the imposition of certain linguistic standards and the denigration of others has characterised imperial projects across the centuries (Migge & Léglise, 2007). With language—and by extension, translation and interpreting—representing not just an instrument of communication but also a statement of power, formal and informal policies have been fundamental in ensuring the promotion of selected languages as well as the prohibition or minoritisation of others (Baker & Pérez-González, 2011, p. 45). In the European context, this institutionalisation of selected languages—typically the official or dominant languages of major nation-states—and their spread via colonisation has had profound consequences on the global dissemination of languages such as French, Russian, Spanish, and particularly English. Indeed, in the postcolonial context, the presence of English as a first or additional language remains key in contemporary language policy discourses around the world, leading to an array

of implications for education, society, and even national identity (Bhatt, 2010; Hoyte-West, 2024a).

In settings such as education, administration, and the military, as well as in large companies and enterprises, the institutional use of languages can be said to acquire particular magnitude when operating in bilingual or multilingual environments (e.g., see de Fourestier, 2010; Turner & Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2014; Wakkumbura, 2016). Indeed, a study on the global Finnish corporation KONE determined that multinationals “cannot allow language to become a peripheral, or forgotten, issue, given that it permeates virtually every aspect of their operations” (Marschan et al., 1997, p. 597).

At the national, international, or supranational levels, such entities may therefore have additional linguistic requirements to ensure successful communication across language barriers, often relying on translation and interpreting services which may be performed by a wide variety of personnel, ranging from trained in-house or freelance translators and interpreters to *ad hoc* practitioners. As will be discussed subsequently, the creation and institutionalisation of such services is something which has occurred for centuries, with particular relevance in colonial and imperialist contexts (Caminade & Pym, 1998).

At this point, it must be underscored that, for millennia, translation and interpreting between languages were strictly human endeavours—i.e., an activity and professional domain restricted to those with competencies in another spoken or signed language beyond the mother tongue. Yet, it is important to mention that over the past half-century, increasing advancements in technology have overturned this notion, revolutionising the sector not only for its practitioners, but also for society at large, thereby affecting all of us who require or consume multilingual services irrespective of format. Even in the hallowed chambers of the European Union (EU), an international organisation known for its longstanding maximalist multilingualism policy which encompasses the two dozen official languages of its 28 member states, change is afoot (Modiano, 2022). Despite its unique commitment to equality between all of its official languages, the practical role of English is becoming ever more important across the EU despite its status as the co-official language of just two of the bloc’s smaller states and the mother tongue of less than one percent of EU citizens (Modiano, 2024,

p. 204). And a recent statement by the current German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, opined that interpreters will doubtlessly be replaced by machines in the coming years (Txabarriaga, 2025). As such, technology has ensured that what was formerly considered something of an attribute—i.e., the skill of translating or interpreting from one language into another—is becoming commonplace, even in high-level contexts such as international fora and symposia.

Though movements such as “slow translation” emphasise the continuing importance of the human touch (Hurot, 2022; 2023), open questions naturally remain about the future contours of language management in institutions and organisations, particularly in terms of market forces and evolving official policies. Yet, for the time being, the relevant organs, structures, and hierarchies relating to languages and language policy remain, as exemplified by the continuing need for directorates of translation and interpreting at the various EU institutions and elsewhere.

By placing an interdisciplinary spotlight on this wide-ranging and relevant topic from linguistics, literary studies, and translation studies, this article explores aspects of institutional translation via close reading of *Babel*¹, a bestselling historical novel by the American author R. F. Kuang first published in 2022. Though perhaps unusual in terms of a case study, the selection of this fictional example—set in a speculative early 19th century Oxford—builds on prior work which acknowledges the interplay between literary studies and management studies (e.g., see de Monthoux, 1979; Michaelson, 2017; Lehman & Morgan, 2021, etc.), as studies on works by authors as different as Tove Jansson (Tienari & Savage, 2024) and J. K. Rowling (Yu et al., 2021) to Upton Sinclair (Man, 2024) and Franz Kafka (Dziedzic, 2025) have elaborated. However, though of course recognising the value of organisational analyses of fiction, the present article has opted to place a literary lens on the topic. In analysing *Babel*’s Royal Institute of Translation, the fictional institution which forms the novel’s

¹ The book’s full title is *Babel, or The Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators’ Revolution*. The paperback edition (Kuang, 2023) will be used in this study.

centrepiece,² this study therefore aims to outline the structures and hierarchies presented through analysis of a selected excerpt, interlinking these with salient observations on the real-life institutionalisation and professionalisation of translation and interpreting in the historical and modern-day contexts.

Languages in institutional contexts: some brief comments

Within the discipline of linguistics, theoretical perspectives on language management emerged in the late 1980s (Jernudd & Neustupný, 1987). Since then, scholars have examined and situated it within various facets of language policy and planning (e.g., see Spolsky, 2009; Nekvapil, 2016, etc.) and case studies of language management in specific organisations and settings have also been conducted (e.g., Nekvapil & Nekula, 2006; Wilmot, 2022). The present analysis rather focuses more, however, on institutional approaches to applied languages—particularly translation and interpreting—from an interdisciplinary perspective involving linguistics, literary studies, and translation studies.

However, it is necessary to state that much work on various sociological aspects of the major international employers of translators and interpreters has been conducted (e.g., Koskinen, 2008; Duflou, 2016). The creation of cadres of professional translators, interpreters, and other specialised linguists is often found within various international and institutional contexts in the present day—for example, the existence of departments and directorates dedicated to translation, interpreting, and multilingualism in the institutions of the EU, United Nations (UN), and other supranational and national organisations (Apostolou, 2011; Sheng, 2024, pp. 134–143, etc.).

Noting the early 19th-century temporal setting of *Babel*, the historical context for the training and institutionalisation of translators and interpreters within the European imperial context is also worthy of brief mention. As has been additionally presented

² As the Institute and the tower are also nicknamed 'Babel', they will be referred to by their official moniker in this article to avoid possible confusion with the novel's title.

elsewhere (Hoyte-West, 2024b, pp. 106-107), the administration of the multiple languages and ethnicities of the late Ottoman Empire also required the services of dragomans, who were fluent in various languages and also had diplomatic capabilities (Rothman, 2021). The officialised multilingualism of late-19th century Austria-Hungary naturally required the services of teams of skilled linguists, and with the Austrian portion of the empire recognising 11 official languages, translation thus represented a key component of the empire's day-to-day administrative and operational capabilities (Wolf, 2015). For those European nations with expansionist aims on other continents, institutionalised language and translator training was therefore a key component in their colonising missions, as the 19th-century creation of establishments as varied as the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in Moscow (Şahin, 2010, p. 600), the College of Interpreters in French Indo-China (Vo, 2024), and the Seminar for Oriental Languages in Berlin (Spidle, 1973, pp. 235-237) attest. As such, by embedding language training at the heart of the apparatus of the modern colonising state, it has been illustrated that translators and interpreters therefore performed key roles in both contiguous and overseas empires.

The complex relationship between language and power is well-known (e.g., see Fairclough, 1989), and Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko observe in the introductory chapter of their seminal edited collection *Translation and Power* that translation can be related to all of the definitions of 'power' in the Oxford English Dictionary "in part, because translation is a metonymic process as well as a metaphoric one" (Gentzler & Tymoczko, 2002, p. xvii).

For translators, too, this is a dynamic that has often proven to be influential, particularly in the imperial early 19th-century context which is the temporal setting of R. F. Kuang's *Babel*. Indeed, Susan Bassnett and Harish Trividi highlight the ideological role practitioners played at that time through presenting the cases of highly-acclaimed mid-century literary translations from Persian (Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*)³ and from Arabic (Edward Lane's (1859) version of *The Thousand and One Nights*). Despite the storied nature of

³ Scarcely noticed on its initial small-scale publication in 1859, FitzGerald's version of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* became extremely popular during the 19th century and was revised several times during the author's lifetime (see Morris, 2023).

the texts and the richly abiding literary and cultural heritage of both languages, Bassnett and Trividi underline that the translators “clearly saw themselves as belonging to a superior cultural system” and thereby represented “a means both of containing the artistic achievements of writers in other languages and of asserting the supremacy of the dominant, European culture” (Bassnett & Trividi, 1999, p. 6). This is echoed by Sherry Simon, who underscores that the notion of “‘Translation’ refers not only to the transfer of specific texts into European languages, but to all the practices whose aim was to compact and reduce an alien reality into the terms imposed by a triumphant Western culture” (Simon, 2000, p. 11).

To this can be added the particularities of the British colonial milieu, where the role of English in translation processes also assumed key importance via policies of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), a topic which *Babel* explores in depth. As applied by cultural theorist Tejaswini Niranjana to the situation of British-ruled India, by “forming a certain kind of subject, in presenting particular versions of the colonised, translation brings into being overarching concepts of reality, knowledge, and representation” (Niranjani, 1990, p. 774). She adds that this trifecta and its underlying suppositions also “completely occlude the violence which accompanies the construction of the colonial subject” (Niranjani, 1990, p. 774). As will be presented in subsequent sections of this article, this is a state of affairs which the happenings in the fictional *Babel*—and the Royal Institute of Translation—not only depict but eventually aim to avenge.

R. F. Kuang and *Babel*

A graduate of both Oxford and Cambridge, the prize-winning Chinese-American author Rebecca F. Kuang is the author of several acclaimed and bestselling historically-informed novels, often dealing with themes relating to East Asia, colonialism, and empire, topics which also feature prominently in *Babel* (Hsu, 2025). Featuring on the *New York Times* bestseller list, the novel has received numerous international awards and prizes, with its position “at the crossing-place between popular genre fiction and literary fiction” (Fletcher & Leane, 2024, p. 9) ensuring a wide appeal.

As the titular allusion to the Old Testament suggests, Kuang's *Babel* also refers to a tower; however, in this instance, it reflects the nickname given to by the students to the eight-storey edifice which houses the Royal Institute of Translation. Offering a fictional portrait of an imperialist language training institution, the book is primarily set in a speculative Oxford during the mid-1830s (see Fusco, 2025). With the 19th century characterised by expanding European colonisation and the consequent annexation and subjugation of vast swathes of the globe, this decade was a crucial time for Britain and its empire as it stood on the cusp of modernity and had also abolished slavery (for more, see Manning, 1965). As will be presented later, In Kuang's ersatz world, Britain's imperial dominance is formalised by the presence and fashioning of magical silver bars where translation between English and another language pair⁴ plays a special role.

In terms of *Babel*'s location, Kuang's notional pre-Victorian Oxford shares many similarities with the real one. With its first college founded almost eight centuries ago, Oxford is the oldest university in the British Isles and one of the world's most highly-ranked tertiary institutions. As well as its enduring status as an elite powerhouse and as a crucible of literary and cultural production (Dougill, 2010), the university also retains the footprints of Britain's lengthy imperial past (University of Oxford, 2025), factors which are explored in the novel in an original manner.

Babel's principal narrative is essentially the story of young Robin Swift, a multilingual orphan of mixed European and Chinese origin who is taken from his native Canton and brought to Britain by the mysterious Professor Lovell. Taking particular care of the boy (it later transpires that Robin is his illegitimate son), Lovell ensures his charge enters Oxford University's most prestigious and elite institute, alongside a small group of new entrants from various other linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Although they are expected to utilise their polyglot abilities to be loyal servants of the British empire, Robin and his colleagues become aware of the darker side of the role of the Royal Institute of Translation in the wider colonial

⁴ As defined by a leading international language services company, the term 'language pair' represents "two languages that can be translated from one to another" (RWS, 2025).

project, which leads to a dramatic outcome. With its focus on language and its role in colonisation processes, it is therefore unsurprising that institutional translation and the management of languages feature heavily in the novel. Though ostensibly set in a notional version of the early 19th century, it draws attention to many issues (such as power, race, colonialism, and identity) that are equally applicable to our current reality. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its popularity, there has been an impressive amount of research conducted on *Babel* since its publication, which have analysed numerous facets of this original and impacting work (for example, see Kohlke, 2022; Bădulescu, 2024; Abri   Ciarrocca, 2025; Liu, 2025; Prafitri et al., 2025; Teliban, 2025; etc.). Yet, as far as can be determined, previous research has not focused on the aspect explored in this study—i.e., on the institutional structure and hierarchy of the Royal Institute of Translation as depicted in the novel.

In providing some interdisciplinary remarks on this phenomenon through analysis of a specific episode from the novel (the students' initial encounter with the Institute via a guided tour of the building), this study aims to add to the literature on depictions of institutional translation in fiction and culture. Though organisational entities (such as various international institutions) do feature as part of the setting of a given literary narrative, such as the International Criminal Court in Katie Kitamura's (2021) novel *Intimacies* (Wu, 2024) and the UN headquarters in the Hollywood film *The Interpreter* (Pollack, 2005), it is commonly a focus on individual practitioners and their personal plurilingual and professional attributes that is often used to drive the plot of a creative work: "the inclusion of translators and interpreters as main or significant characters can be used to highlight aspects of the profession" (Miletich, 2024, p. xvii). As will be presented in the case of R. F. Kuang's *Babel*, however, analysis of the institutional setting can also yield valuable reflections on the role of language and its management therein.

Findings and discussion: The Royal Institute of Translation in *Babel*

After the long sea voyage from Asia, young Robin's first encounter with the imperial powerhouse of 1830s Britain is a sojourn involving intensive training

in London, which “had accumulated the lion’s share of both the world’s silver ore and the world’s languages” (Kuang, 2023, p. 21)—the mythical “silver hummed through the city” (Kuang, 2023, p. 21). His enigmatic guardian, Professor Lovell, outlines Robin’s destiny as a student and future graduate of the Royal Institute of Translation, assuring him that he will “be one of the few scholars in the world that knows the secrets of silver-working” (Kuang, 2023, p. 23). After the necessary cultural and linguistic preparations, including a personalised crash course in Latin and Greek, Robin arrives in Oxford, a city which “in 1836 was in an era of becoming, an insatiable creature feeding on the wealth which it bred” (Kuang, 2023, p. 61), thereby hinting at the quasi-cannibalistic nature not only of silver-working but also of the language-based colonisation processes which it symbolises.

Accommodated at University College (‘Univ’), Oxford’s oldest college,⁵ Robin and another member of the student cohort, Ramy, are taken to the university’s ancient library, the Bodleian. As putative members of the Institute, their burnished status as translators quickly becomes apparent—the director of the Bodleian, the Reverend Dr Bandinel, himself guides them to the Translators’ Reading Room: “‘Couldn’t let a clerk do it’, he sighed. ‘Normally we let the fools wander about on their own and ask for directions if lost. But you translators—you truly appreciate what’s going on here’” (Kuang, 2023, p. 62). This is reiterated by the fact that, in searching for books on their reading lists, their association with the Institute literally opens doors which are about to close: “mention of the Translation Institute seemed to hold immense power [...] the clerks told them they could stay as late as they liked” (Kuang, 2023, pp. 63–64).

The small cohort consists of two male (Robin and Ramy) and two female students (Victoire and Letty) yet is quite diverse, both in terms of personal ethnocultural origins as well as linguistic capabilities. Alongside the classical languages of Latin and Greek, an “entry requirement” (Kuang, 2023, p. 73) which demonstrates the two tongues’ foundational status as the bedrock of western

⁵ Kuang is herself an alumna of the same college, where she completed an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies as a Marshall Scholar (University College Oxford, 2022).

civilisation, the students are fluent in a range of modern languages alongside English: Arabic, Persian, and Urdu (Ramy); French and Haitian Creole (Victoire); French and German (Letty); and Mandarin Chinese (Robin) (Kuang, 2023, p. 73). In Robin's case, the hierarchy of languages is notable; despite being from Canton and speaking the local language fluently: "His Cantonese, Professor Lovell [had] informed him, could now be forgotten", adding that "Mandarin was the language of the Qing imperial court in Peking, the language of officials and scholars, and therefore the only dialect that mattered" (Kuang, 2023, p. 28).

The group are taken to the tower housing the Royal Institute of Translation, located in Kuang's speculative world near Oxford's iconic Radcliffe Camera. The students "gazed up at the tower. It was a magnificent building" (Kuang, 2023, p. 72), and are met and guided around it by Anthony Ribben, a Black postgraduate student with French, German, and Spanish, who later becomes instrumental in the subversive and breakaway counterweight to the Institute, the Hermes Society.

With eight floors, the physical structure of 'Babel' (the epithet given to it by its students) is of immense importance in the novel. In guiding them through their new surroundings, Anthony introduces the Institute by offering a brief general summary of its historical background, noting that "Translation agencies have always been indispensable tools of—nay, the centres of—great civilisations" (Kuang, 2023, p. 75), thus emphasising the centrality of language and translation to the cultural and ideological hegemony it aims to disseminate. The institution's prominence in Britain's colonial ascendancy is also reiterated: "The Royal Institute of Translation was founded in London in the early seventeenth century, though it didn't move to its current home in Oxford until 1715 and the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, after which the British decided it might be prudent to train young lads to speak the languages of the colonies the Spanish has just lost" (Kuang, 2023, p. 75).

The group enter the building on the first level, a large lobby where, they are informed, "all business gets conducted here. Local tradesmen ordering bars for their equipment, city officials requesting public works maintenance" (Kuang, 2023, p. 75)—it is, Anthony notes, "the only area of the tower accessible to civilians" (Kuang, 2023, p. 75). In short, this serves to emphasise the Institute's

exclusiveness by underlining its restricted access—i.e., that its public-facing business is limited to solely one floor at the tower's ground level.

The second floor is devoted to the legal department which, as Anthony outlines, consists of “International treaties, overseas trade” (Kuang, 2023, p. 76)—in sum, “the gears of empire, the stuff that makes the world go round” (Kuang, 2023, p. 76). An explanatory footnote about the department adds that “one could argue that the business of translators in Legal was manipulating language to create favourable terms for European parties” (Kuang, 2023, p. 76). It is also mentioned that this floor employs the largest quantity of Royal Institute of Translation graduates. Thus, although not explicitly mentioned, it can be advanced that these in-house legal posts are relatively commonplace, despite widespread perceptions of law-related careers as being of high status. However, it has been found that, when compared to careers at the Bar, employment as an in-house lawyer for companies can be viewed by fellow legal professionals as being of lesser status (Mackie, 1989, p. 213).

The tower's third floor is, according to Anthony, the “landing base for the live interpreters” (Kuang, 2023, p. 76) who are seldom in residence: “They're almost never here” (Kuang, 2023, p. 76). Interestingly, given their global peregrinations, Anthony explains to the students that the Institute's spoken-language interpreters are not “career interpreters but usually natural polyglots who picked up their languages elsewhere—they had missionary parents, or they spent summers with foreign relatives” (Kuang, 2023, p. 77), which itself harks back to how recruitment practices occurred in the days before real-life interpreter training institutions were established in the 20th century (e.g., see Rothman, 2015). Interestingly, given the professional prestige often accorded to conference and diplomatic interpreters by virtue of their honed skillset and the settings they operate in (Thiéry, 2015, p. 107), Anthony adds that in the Institute “live interpretation isn't considered all that glamorous, because all that really matters is that you get your basic points across without offending anyone. You don't get to play with the real intricacies of language, which is of course where the *real* fun is” (Kuang, 2023, p. 77).

Status—or lack of it—also informs Anthony's view of the Institute's fourth floor, which is devoted to literature: “A bit low on the prestige run, to be honest,

but it's a more coveted placement than interpretation" (Kuang, 2023, p. 77). However, he adds that literary translation is considered "the natural first step towards becoming a Babel professor" (Kuang, 2023, p. 77), and thus entry to the organisation's teaching staff. Anthony's relatively lowly view of the literature scholar is hotly contested by another scholar the students meet during the tour of the floor, Vimal Srinivasan, who welcomes them "to the best floor in the tower" (Kuang, 2023, p. 78). This interesting observation on the status of the Institute's literature department can be counterpointed by real-life observations on literary translators who, despite not always enjoying strong economic benefits, nonetheless possess considerable intellectual and cultural capital through their work (Hoyte-West, 2022; 2023). This is also highlighted by the fact that, at the time of writing, the complexities of literary translation have arguably proven the most resistant to machine translation and AI technologies, though of course these aspects are evolving (Hoyte-West, 2026). An illustration of the power of literary translation can be seen in the following excerpts, which observes that the Institute's literature specialists "could be the most dangerous scholars of them all, because they're the ones who really understand languages—know how they live and breathe and how they can make our blood pump, or our skin prickle, with just a turn of phrase" (Kuang, 2023, p. 78). However, according to Anthony, it transpires that they are "too obsessed fiddling with their lovely images to bother with how all that living energy might be channels into something far more powerful. I mean, of course, silver" (Kuang, 2023, p. 78)—in short, that he believes that the literary translator's talents would be better-used if they engaged their brainpower and expertise into something much more lucrative.

With the epigraph of the novel's opening chapter featuring a quotation from Antonio de Nebrija's landmark 1492 grammar of the Spanish (Castilian) language (Kuang, 2023, p. 5—see also Cassen & Kirk, 2024, p. 429), the intersection between linguistic standardisation and empire is embodied by the fifth and sixth floors of the tower. As their guide explains to the students, these teaching and reference rooms contain "the primers, grammars, readers, thesauruses" (Kuang, 2023, p. 79) of every single language spoken in the world. The most important of these reference materials are the 'Grammaticas' on the Institute's sixth floor, consisting of red leather-bound volumes kept in display cases, representing

“the only comprehensive, authoritative collections of knowledge of every language that exist” (Kuang, 2023, p. 80). Indeed, their invaluable importance is highlighted by the fact that the volumes are “impervious to fire, flood, and attempted removal by anyone who isn’t in the Institute register” (Kuang, 2023, p. 80)—i.e., that access to these linguistic treasure troves is strictly controlled, thereby highlighting their fundamental role in the Babel project.

Though not mentioned on the students’ tour of the tower, the map at the beginning of the book notes that this is dedicated to offices. Anthony takes the young newbies to the eighth and highest floor, which represents the apex of the Institute’s power. Unlike the other floors, which are open plan, the floorplan here is “hidden behind doors and walls” (Kuang, 2023, p. 81). Thus, the secretive nature of the activities which go on there are also highlighted in spatial terms, demonstrating a marked difference with other floors which have preceded it. In visual terms, the eighth floor is also strikingly different, being “more like a workshop than a research library. Scholars stood bent around worktables like mechanics, holding assortments of engraving tools to silver bars of all shapes and sizes” (Kuang, 2023, p. 81). It is here that the students are introduced to the organisation’s director, Professor Jerome Playfair, who discourses at length about the Institute’s civilising mission: “Translation, from time immemorial, has been the facilitator of peace. Translation makes possible communication, which in turn makes possible the kind of diplomacy, trade, and cooperation between foreign peoples that brings wealth and prosperity to all” (Kuang, 2023, p. 83). Adding that “There is indeed something special about silver” (Kuang, 2023, p. 83), Playfair expounds on its links to hermeneutics, emphasising that “the power of the bar lies in words. More specifically, the stuff of language that words are incapable of expressing—the stuff that gets lost when we move between one language and another. The silver catches what’s lost and manifests it into being” (Kuang, 2023, p. 84). To this end, he performs a brief experiment involving an English and a German word pair which causes a silver bar to vibrate violently. For the incoming students, it is noted that though: “they were no strangers to this magic [...] it was another thing to witness with their own eyes the warping of reality, the way words seized what no words could describe and invoked a physical effect that should not be” (Kuang, 2023, p. 85)—i.e., it

was a clear demonstration of the power that silver-working—and by extension, the Royal Institute of Translation, as its principal vessel—could wield.

Zoning in on the eight-storey structure of the Royal Institute of Translation itself, it is clear that the imposing edifice holds both physical and metaphorical weight in the novel and its events. Indeed, the tower's key importance is denoted not only by a map of the building and its floorplan at the opening of the novel, but also—in paratextual terms—by the unique tower-shaped bookmark which accompanies the paperback edition of the volume. Combined with the events of the novel, these aspects serve to reiterate the Institute's tower as a phallic symbol of colonial dominance, similarly to research on late 20th-century office towers which described them as the “popular architecture of a patriarchal corporate culture” (Dovey, 1992, p. 173). In addition, the physical structure of the Royal Institute and its elite intellectual scholarship also highlights the institution's separateness from everything else, with scholar Sarah R. Davies stating that “intentionally or not, Kuang's *Babel* echoes images of academia as an ivory tower, a metaphor used to present universities as cloistered environments that are segregated from the societies in which they sit” (Davies, 2024, p. 11). As the most elite department of an already elite university, the Institute is thus doubly isolated from the colonial society that it aims to foster.

Thus, in practical terms, it is seemingly that the Royal Institute of Translation's hierarchy emphasises a traditional pyramid-like management structure (Saiti & Stefou, 2020; Mercadal, 2021), its various floors occupied by bureaucrats holding different statuses and representing different facets of the translational and linguistic professions with clearly demarcated functions. As such, at first glance it resembles many of the directorates of language services present in many contemporary multilingual international organisations, with a range of highly-trained personnel performing specific job profiles as lawyer-linguists, spoken-language interpreters, or translators (Prieto Ramos & Guzmán, 2022). Yet, in the context of the Institute, the whole construct is pervaded by the interlinkage between colonial power and language: the dominance of English, as the language of the British Empire, is omnipresent. Indeed, insurrectionist attempts to destroy the dominance of the Institute and the colonial hierarchy occur later in the novel, leading to the eventual annihilation of the tower, like its Biblical namesake. These

revolutionary grumblings are initially exemplified by the breakaway Hermes Society, a covert underground organisation formed by disaffected former Institute students. There, its projects include dictionaries of regional and minority languages (Kuang, 2023, p. 384), and silver bars with language pairs excluding English are being created. Yet, despite efforts to create greater diversity, the dominance of the colonial language continues, with Cathy, one of the other rebel Hermes members, musing that: “I think it’s not conceivable that one day, most of the world will speak only English” (Kuang, 2023, p. 386). To Robin’s comment that this “would destroy silver-working” (Kuang, 2023, p. 386), Cathy, answers that this represents “the great contradiction of colonialism [...] It’s built to destroy that which it prizes most” (Kuang, 2023, p. 386).

In accordance with its traditional tower-like managerial structure, it is unsurprising that the Institute’s power is located in the building’s highest echelon, being both metaphorically and literally the organisation’s zenith. This is demonstrated not only by the presence of Professor Playfair, who as the Institute’s chair represents a CEO-like personage, but also by the presence on the eighth floor of silver-working, the main driver of British imperial supremacy as portrayed in the novel. Though several aspects of the novel relating to resource-related extractivism and social theory have already been discussed (Benia & Amrane, 2025), it is interesting to note how, in the Institute’s hierarchy, intellectual labour (i.e., translation and interpreting) is superseded by something more resembling a trade or craft (i.e., silver-working), thereby inverting the blue-collar/white-collar dichotomy. This is highlighted by the students’ observations that the prestigious eighth-floor of the tower resembles a factory rather than a library, as might have been expected. In short, as Anthony’s comments regarding the literary translators on the fourth floor illustrate, the physical activity of silver-working is demonstrated as being of significantly greater value to the Institute (and beyond) than the brainwork diligently performed by the translators and other associated personnel. Thus, in attaching this worth to the magical silver goods, it can be argued that this focus is redolent of the industrial might that would propel Britain and its empire—and by extension, its colonial systems and institutions—across the world.

Conclusion

In an interdisciplinary manner employing insights from linguistics, literature, and translation studies, the present article has delineated the structure and hierarchical nature of the Royal Institute of Translation in *Babel*, tying these—where relevant—to real-life aspects relating to the status and institutionalisation of translation and interpretation in multilingual organisations. Via the close reading of a selected portion of text (where Robin and the other entering students first become acquainted with the tower that will forever be linked with their destinies), the presence of a strict hierarchy—with silver-workers representing the highest echelon—is also ingrained in the Institute's architecture, with each floor dedicated to a particular translation-related task of varying prestige. Noting the symbolic and literal importance of the building as the crucible of British colonialism, the Institute's structure and hierarchy unsurprisingly emphasise its actions and role in promoting a specific vision of imperial power, a perspective which ultimately, by the end of the novel, is destroyed. By providing a short overview of the structure and management of translation-related activities in a fictional organisation in a speculative world, the excerpt analysed in this article has also highlighted the different attributes and statuses accorded to different translational practitioners, which do not necessarily correspond with real-life situations.

In reorienting the scope of the present interdisciplinary approach away from linguistics, literature, and translation studies, further research could examine Kuang's novel from the perspective of management studies. In addition to deepening the discussion on how the novel's depiction of silver-working views translation purely as a resource to be exploited, a different disciplinary approach could utilise relevant theories to demonstrate how the Institute's restrictive policies systematise and perpetuate inequality in organisational contexts, as well as how the Institute's leadership imposes discursive dominance through its restrictive linguistic oversight.

Nonetheless, in opening up a discussion on the inextricably intertwined legacies of language, colonialism, and imperialism, the structure and hierarchy outlined in R. F. Kuang's *Babel* has served to underline just how translators and

interpreters in institutional settings, as instruments of language policy, can exercise an influential role with potentially far-reaching consequences.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express his thanks to the anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable recommendations and feedback.

References

- Abrigó Ciarrocca, V. (2025).** Formalizando el imperio: Los dispositivos narrativos y la crítica poscolonial en *Babel* de RF Kuang. *Revista Luthor*, 61, 72–82.
- Apostolou, F. (2011).** Introduction: Interpreting and translation in the EU. *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, 19, 95–110.
- Bădulescu, A. (2024).** The power of language: “Babel or the necessity of violence” by RF Kuang. *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies*, 37, 74–78.
- Baker, M., & Pérez-González, L. (2011).** Translation and interpreting. In J. Simpson (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of applied linguistics* (pp. 39–52). Routledge.
- Bassnett, S., & Trivedi, H. (1999).** Introduction: Of colonies, cannibals and vernaculars. In S. Bassnett & H. Trivedi (Eds.), *Post-colonial translation. Theory and practice* (pp. 1–18). Routledge.
- Benia, A., & Amrane, N. (2025).** Capturing the invisible: Dynamics of abstraction and extraction in capitalism, imperialism, and photography through the lens

of R. F. Kuang's *Babel* (2022). *El Onda Review in Linguistics and Discourse Analysis*, 9(1), 10–31.

Bhatt, R. M. (2010). Unraveling post-colonial identity through language. In N. Coupland (Ed.), *The handbook of language and globalization* (pp. 520–539). Blackwell Publishing.

Caminade, M., & Pym, A. (1998). Translator-training institutions. In M. Baker (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of translation studies* (pp. 280–285). Routledge.

Cassen, F., & Kirk, S. L. (2024). 'Motivated mistranslation': Exploring translation practices in colonial contexts. *Colonial Latin American Review*, 33(4), 429–436.

Davies, S. R. (2024). *Science societies: Resources for life in a technoscientific world*. Bristol University Press.

de Fourestier, J. (2010). Official languages in the armed forces of multilingual countries: A comparative study. *European Journal of Language Policy*, 2(1), 91–110.

de Monthoux, P. G. (1979). The 'novel' approach to management. *Journal of General Management*, 5(2), 42–53.

Dougill, J. (2010). *Oxford in English literature: The Making, and Undoing, of the English Athens*. AuthorHouse.

Dovey, K. (1992). Corporate towers and symbolic capital. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 19(2), 173–188.

Duflou, V. (2016). *Be(com)ing a conference interpreter: An ethnography of EU interpreters as a professional community*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Dziedzic, J. (2025). Metaphors of authority: Kafka's *The Castle* in discursive leadership. *International Journal of Contemporary Management*, 61(1), 123–135.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Longman.

Fletcher, L., & Leane, E. (2024). *Space, place, and bestsellers: Moving books*. Cambridge University Press.

Fusco, S. (2025). The glocal cosmopolises of Chinese/American speculative fiction. *Migrating Minds: Journal of Cultural Cosmopolitanism*, 3(1), 97–121.

Gentzler, E., & Tymoczko, M. (2002). Introduction. In E. Gentzler & M. Tymoczko (Eds.), *Translation and power* (pp. xi–xxviii). University of Massachusetts Press.

Hoyte-West, A. (2022). Literary translators as an elite: A preliminary overview. *Sociologia și asistența socială: cercetare și profesionalizare*, 184–190.

Hoyte-West, A. (2023). Translators, interpreters, and the creative class: An exploration of the post-COVID profession. *Culture Crossroads*, 23, 53–64.

Hoyte-West, A. (2024a). Preface: Exploring the digital arena: Language, communication, and sociocultural shifts. *International Journal of Multilingualism and Languages for Specific Purposes*, 6(2), 9–12.

Hoyte-West, A. (2024b). Kitsch in language: Some observations on the kitschification of the translational professions. In M. Szostak (Ed.) *Non-artistic kitsch* (pp. 105–123). Palgrave Macmillan.

Hoyte-West, A. (2026). AI-based technologies and the modern-day translation and interpreting professions: Perspectives from management aesthetics. In M. Szostak (Ed.), *Aesthetics of human-AI collaboration in creative activities: Art, cultural heritage, and academic research practice* (pp. 183–205). Brill Mentis.

Hsu, H. (2025). The otherworldly ambitions of R. F. Kuang. *The New Yorker* (25 August). Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/08/25/the-otherworldly-ambitions-of-r-f-kuang>. Accessed 20 October 2025.

Hurot, L. (2022). Vers une slow translation? Ralentir pour mieux traduire. *Traduire: Revue française de la traduction*, 246, 109–117.

Hurot, L. (2023). Slow translation: un remède possible au mal-être? *Traduire: Revue française de la traduction*, 248, 15–22.

Jernudd, B. H., & Neustupný, J. (1987). Language planning for whom? In L. Laforge (Ed.), *Proceedings of the international colloquium on language planning* (pp. 69–84). Les Presses de l'Université Laval.

Kitamura, K. (2021). *Intimacies*. Riverhead Books.

Kohlke, M. L. (2022). The weaponisation of the language of oppression: Review of RF Kuang, *Babel: Or the necessity of violence: An arcane history of the Oxford translators' revolution*. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 14(1), 261–280.

Koskinen, K. (2008). *Translating institutions: An ethnographic study of EU translation*. Routledge.

Kuang, R. (2023). *Babel*. Harper Voyager.

Lehman, I.M., & Morgan, C. (2021). Preface: Literature, art and management: Insights, perspectives and synergies. *Discourses on Culture*, 16(1), 2021. 9–21.

Liu, J. (2025). Rebecca F. Kuang: *Babel* (2022). In H. Grugger & S. Neuhaus (Eds.), *Der Campusroman: Texte–Theorien–Traditionen* (pp. 643–647). Springer.

Mackie, K. J. (1989). *Lawyers in business and the law business*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Man, F. (2024). Muckraking through the novel: Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and the early history of human resources management. *Organizacija*, 57(1), 2024, 99–112.

Manning, H. T. (1965). Who ran the British Empire 1830-1850? *Journal of British Studies*, 5(1), 88–121.

Marschan, R., Welch, D., & Welch, L. (1997). Language: The forgotten factor in multinational management. *European Management Journal*, 15(5), 591–598.

Mercadal, T. M. (2021). Hierarchical organizational structure. *EBSCO Research Starters*. Retrieved from <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/business-and-management/hierarchical-organizational-structure>. Accessed 20 October 2025.

Michaelson, C. (2017). A list of novels for teaching business ethics in the 21st century. *Management Teaching Review*, 2(3), 235–249.

Migge, B., & Léglise, I. (2007). Language and colonialism. Applied linguistics in the context of creole communities. In M. Hellinger & A. Pauwels (Eds.), *Handbook of language and communication: Diversity and change* (pp. 297–338). Mouton de Gruyter.

Miletich, M. (2024). Introduction. In M. Miletich (Ed.), *Transfiction: Characters in search of translation studies* (pp. xv–xxiii). Vernon Press.

Modiano, M. (2022). EU language policy under review. *European Journal of Language Policy*, 14(2), 249–267.

Modiano, M. (2024). Introduction: English in Europe. *World Englishes*, 43(2), 204–209.

Morris, B. E. (2023). Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám by Edward FitzGerald. *EBSCO Research Starters*. Retrieved from <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/>

literature-and-writing/rubaiyat-omar-khayyam-edward-fitzgerald. Accessed 20 October 2025.

Nekvapil, J. (2015). Language management theory as one approach in language policy and planning. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 17(1), 11–22.

Nekvapil, J., & Nekula, M. (2006). On language management in multinational companies in the Czech Republic. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 7(2–3), 307–327.

Niranjana, T. (1990). Translation, colonialism and rise of English. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25(15), 773–779.

Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.

Pollack, S. (2005). *The Interpreter*. Universal Pictures.

Prafitri, W., Nasir, M. A., & Triyoga, A. I. (2025). Tracing the immigrant narrative in the novel *Babel*: mapping identity and belonging. *CaLLs (Journal of Culture, Arts, Literature, and Linguistics)*, 11, 59–70.

Prieto Ramos, F., & Guzmán, D. (2022). Institutional translation profiles: A comparative analysis of descriptors and requirements. In T. Svoboda, Ł. Biel, & V. Sosoni (Eds.), *Institutional translator training* (pp. 49–72). Routledge.

Rothman, E. N. (2015). Jeunes de langues. In F. Pöchhacker (Ed.), *The Routledge encyclopedia of interpreting studies* (pp. 217–220). Routledge.

Rothman, E. N. (2021). *The dragoman renaissance: Diplomatic interpreters and the routes of orientalism*. Cornell University Press.

RWS (2025). FAQ–What is a language pair? Retrieved from <https://www.rws.com/language-weaver/FAQ/what-is-a-language-pair/>. Accessed 3 December 2025.

Şahin, L. (2010). Russian Turkology: From past to present. *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi*, 15, 591–644.

Saiti, A., & Stefou, T. (2020). Hierarchical organizational structure and leadership. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*.

Sheng, H. (2024). Academia and international organizations: An exploration of UN language services and implications for universities teaching translation and interpretation. *Journal of Translation Studies*, 4(1), 131–153.

Simon, S. (2000). Introduction. In S. Simon & P. St-Pierre (Eds.), *Changing the terms: Translating in the postcolonial era* (pp. 9–29). University of Ottawa Press.

Spidle, J. W. (1973). Colonial studies in imperial Germany. *History of Education Quarterly*, 13(3), 231–247.

Spolsky, B. (2009). *Language management*. Cambridge University Press.

Teliban, C. D. (2025). Violence and betrayal: Translation as a window into understanding colonialism in RF Kuang's *Babel*, or the necessity of violence. *Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies*, 16(1), 9–22.

Thiéry, C. (2015). Diplomatic interpreting. In F. Pöchhacker (Ed.), *The Routledge encyclopedia of interpreting studies* (pp. 107–108). Routledge.

Tienari, J., & Savage, P. (2024). Leadership and humor, the Moomin way. *Discourses on Culture*, 22(1), 2024, 15–39.

Turner, N., & Wildsmith-Cromarty, R. (2014). Challenges to the implementation of bilingual/multilingual language policies at tertiary institutions in South Africa (1995–2012). *Language Matters*, 45(3), 295–312.

Txabarriaga, R. (2025). German chancellor says AI will replace EU interpreters ‘in the medium term’. *Slator* (22 September). Retrieved from <https://slator.com/german-chancellor-says-ai-will-replace-eu-interpreters/>. Accessed 20 October 2025.

University College Oxford (2022). Babel, or the necessity of violence. Retrieved from <https://www.univ.ox.ac.uk/news/babel-or-the-necessity-of-violence/>. Accessed 20 October 2025.

University of Oxford (2025). Oxford and Empire Network. Retrieved from <https://oxfordandempire.web.ox.ac.uk/home>. Accessed 20 October 2025.

Vo, E. N. (2024). Examining the College of Interpreters and translation issues in colonial Vietnam, 1862–90. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 55(1), 103–125.

Wakhumbura, M. R. (2016). Language pluralism through the administrative service: The use of the official languages policy in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research*, 8(4), 33–44.

Wilmot, N. V. (2022). *Language management: From bricolage to strategy in British companies*. Multilingual Matters.

Wolf, M. (2015). *The Habsburg monarchy’s many-language soul: Translating and interpreting, 1848–1918*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Wu, Y. (2024). Unbearable intimacies: The implicated interpreter in Katie Kitamura’s *Intimacies*. In M. Miletich (Ed.), *Transfiction: Characters in search of translation studies* (pp. 51–67). Vernon Press.

Yu, H. H., Lorenzo-Elarco, K. M., Murro, M. J., McAnany, E. L., & Anderson, H. R. (2021). Teaching leadership with popular culture: Practical lessons from Harry Potter. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 28(2), 156–181.