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Constructing Identities in Indian Business Networks: Discourse Analysis in B2B Marketing Research

<H1>1. Introduction</H1>

This vignette represents an attempt to understand how managers operating in business-to-business (B2B) contexts (i.e., where organizations interact, and people necessarily interact across firm boundaries) make sense of their worlds. My method draws on in-depth interviews that encourage managers to talk of their lived experiences, attitudes and intentions. I show how it can be a legitimate research enterprise to explore managers' stories by taking a discourse analytic approach. In particular, discourse analysis (DA) enables interpretations to be made by me and my fellow researchers (Ellis et al., 2011) of how marketing and purchasing managers achieve the social construction of their identities and those of other network participants, including other individual actors and firms. The inter-related contextual, conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of my research are captured in Figure 5.1.

<TS: Insert Figure 5.1 given in ppt slide in separate file here>

<FIGCAP>*Figure 5.1* Contexts, concepts and theoretical perspectives</FIGCAP>

The exploration of discourses represents an important analytical move for B2B and business network scholarship since discourses '(re)produce knowledge, culture, identities, subjectivities and power relationship in social settings ... [while] specific social actors are very much constrained and even disciplined by the available discursive resource and practices ...' (Vaara and Tienari, 2004, p. 343). A focus on specific legitimating and naturalizing practices in language use is thus a key element of the discursive approach as outlined in this vignette. I will show how DA can help to expose the non-rational and subjective ways in which networks are imagined by their participants (Ellis et al., 2006). DA can make explicit the connections among everyday discourse (or 'little "d" discourse' – Gee 2011, p. 35), sense-making practices and larger social structures, structures that can also be evoked linguistically as 'Big D' Discourses (Gee, 2011, p. 34) such as markets or global networks.

The use of DA allows us to embrace recent calls for B2B scholarship not to view science as merely ‘synonymous with quantification’ (Malhotra and Usley, 2009, p. 29). A discursive perspective brings to the B2B context methodological approaches that draw from across the organizational and broader social science spectrum (cf. Spekman, 2004). This broadening of approaches is important as there is a tendency for B2B researchers to seek permanent, structural explanations of social phenomena which imply some sort of final interpretation. Accepting that the search for the (single) truth is always in vain, I argue for more post-structuralist and social constructionist perspectives of reality, knowledge and language to be adopted. These ‘moderately socially constructivist’ (Fairclough, 2005, p. 916) perspectives challenge conventional marketing theory which tends to take an essentialist view of social reality (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

<H1>2. The case of Indian business networks</H1>

The case study reported in this vignette is drawn from an exploration of identity processes in industrial networks, in particular social constructions of Indian modernity. The main findings have been presented in another article (Ellis et al., 2011): thus, while alluding to these findings, the discussion which follows seeks to highlight particular aspects of a DA methodology, including the justification of the use of DA by B2B marketing researchers.

I have taken a performative view of identity which suggests that identity is not something that one can have, but something that one does (Jenkins, 2008, p. 5). In exploring this ‘performance’ in business networks, my approach adopts the notion of ‘identities in networks’ (Huemer et al., 2009, p. 56). Here, my focus is on the nature of the identity work being carried out by a variety of actors representing different organizations, and the meanings drawn upon by these actors in their discursive positioning of both their selves and of network others. As I have pointed out elsewhere, managers in inter-organizational relationships ‘discursively mark self/other boundaries that varyingly position themselves, and their colleagues, competitors, customers and suppliers’ (Ellis and Ybema, 2010, p. 279). Recognizing these processes allows us to see how language helps actors

construct their own sense of self and at the same time express their membership of (or exclusion from) certain social groups (Pullen et al., 2007, p. 1).

I posit that a discursive approach should enable B2B researchers to consider the meanings which guide managers in their interactions via the study of ‘the ways in which actors in networks describe their own views of networks’ (Easton and Araujo, 1993, pp. 69–70). In doing so, I share Guillet de Monthoux’s (1975, p. 35) desire to ‘illustrate, in their own words, how industrial marketing managers perceive the job of marketing’. Using a discourse analytical approach, however, enables more than illustrating managers’ claims: the method facilitates a rather more nuanced analysis of the discursive work being done in managerial texts.

<H1>3. A discursive methodology</H1>

Svensson (2003, p. 21) argues that ‘marketing work should first and foremost be understood as language use, or more specifically as discourse’, where discourse represents language use as a social practice, or form of action. In exploring such practices, I use the concept of the ‘interpretative repertoire’ to facilitate the study of discursive agency and constraint on the part of network participants. Repertoires are recurrently used systems of terms, figures of speech, grammatical constructions and argumentative patterns viewed as building blocks that speakers are thought to use strategically in explaining, justifying, excusing, etc. (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). They effectively function as scripts (cf. Welch and Wilkinson, 2002) that can facilitate and/or restrict actors’ sense-making and identity construction. Repertoires can be identified through the examination of certain words, metaphors and grammar. They enable evaluative micro-discursive constructions about the behaviours of the self and others.

Discursive data was collected by my co-researchers in the form of transcripts from semi-structured interviews with a variety of managerial participants involved in trade between New Zealand (NZ) and India. All the participants were Indian, with interviews taking place in 2006 in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai. Interviews were conducted in English, with 23 individuals representing organizations operating in the lumber, wool, horticulture, dairy, engineering, IT, tourism and education industries. They lasted between 45

and 90 minutes, and were recorded on audio and video media. Managers were asked open questions concerning their roles and the organizations they represented. These included the initial scene-setting: ‘Tell us about the sector(s) in which your organization operates’, and went on to address issues like, ‘What products or services does your organization provide’ and ‘What role(s) do you perform’; as well as, ‘How would you describe the relationships between your organization and its customers/suppliers?’

To manage the interview data, the preliminary phase of analysis involved a content analytic approach where B2B-related topics such as “markets” or “partnerships” were identified in accounts, and their pattern of occurrence throughout the corpus of transcripts noted. The next task was to identify interpretative repertoires that were employed within the relevant portions of the interviews. The aim was to develop an understanding of how repertoires were used by identifying the various discursive forms of any one repertoire and exploring who used such forms, when and with reference to what. These steps were facilitated by NVivo software, which allowed for a high degree of transparency and levels of agreement as my co-researchers and I coded the data. Consistent coding of text to repertoire nodes was guided by a protocol based in part on the management literature, but also on the *emic* responses of managers. We thus used a combination of *a priori* codes from the literature and *in vivo* codes derived from the data. We believe that our analytical claims can be depended upon because they were derived from accountable procedures that were systematic. They were credible because they were logical and based on evidence. Demonstrating this in DA involves showing how the interpretations of individual segments of talk, as well as overall claims, are grounded in the data (Wood and Kroger, 2000, p. 184), some examples of which follow in the next section of this vignette.

<H1>4. Some selective findings and analysis</H1>

Here, I highlight only a selection of the repertoires that emerged during the study in order to illustrate the use of DA. A detailed analysis of managers’ discursive practices from this study can be found elsewhere (Ellis et al., 2011). Several sets

of linguistic resources appeared to be of significance to Indian managers. Our analysis suggested that particular aspects of this talk could be organized into six interpretative repertoires (summarized in Table 5.1). Although the labels for each repertoire were ours, the analysis was driven by the discourse of the participants in moving from *in vivo* talk, through first order themes ('child' repertoires) and on to second order themes ('parent' repertoires) which became increasingly induced by us in order to offer suggestions regarding the functioning of each over-arching repertoire (cf. Nag et al., 2007, p. 828). The fourth column of Table 5.1 is a reminder that in DA it is not just the identification of linguistic tools that is important; what speakers *do* with language is also crucial. Thus, as each repertoire is discussed in turn, I reflect upon identity-constructing practices within managers' descriptions of B2B relationships.

For each segment of talk that involves the co-construction of meaning, P indicates the participant and R indicates the researcher.

<H2>Repertoire (2b) – Questioning globalization</H2>

Although the questioning globalization repertoire was common, being used by more than half the sample, the negative variant was rarer than more positive views of globalization. The repertoire is of great interest nevertheless, as it is used to assert a national identity for India (and thus Indian network actors), as in the case of this manager, who offers an account of his attempts to use a local quality scheme with his clients. It appears that these customers only accept a 'British' certificatory system as 'international', leaving an Indian alternative, frustratingly, as less credible:

<DLG>P: Many of these (customer) countries are already part of the British kingdom so these people want only the ISO certificate. We have our own certificate in India, but they want the (other) certificate, so I have to go and get that.

R: This is international?

P: They consider it international. (P10 – General Manager – Engineering firm)</DLG>

<H2>Repertoire (3a) – Past and present management practices</H2>

The past and present practices repertoire was moderately common, and found in the talk of about half the speakers. The repertoire's use tends to construct a changing national identity for India, and thereby Indian firms and managers. This participant uses the contrast between past and present to attribute changes in corruption levels to the modern corporate sector. An 'outside' world is evoked (see also the use of 'overseas' and 'other side of the world') where business is apparently 'done' in a certain way, a way that has been communicated to the 'current' Indian generation via education and the media:

<DLG>R: What about issues like corruption, does that frighten New Zealand companies off? I mean, India has a reputation for corruption.

P: No, no. Corruption now is going down because ... the current generation is more exposed to what is happening outside because of their education overseas and also because of the development of satellite and cable television here. So they know the concerns of the other side of the world and how business is done there. (P21 – CEO – IT systems firm)</DLG>

<H2>Repertoire (4b) – Professionalism</H2>

The professionalism repertoire tends to associate 'professional' management with 'modern' business practices, which are then contrasted with traditional 'family' management styles. Yet, even though this participant is quick to affirm the researcher's intervention, he is not so proud of his 'systems' that his family do not continue to exert what appears to be a considerable amount of traditional influence throughout each company they own and paternally administer (or 'guide'):

<DLG>P: Family business versus the modern kinds of business management has been very well woven in India by many and we certainly take pride in being one of them.

R: Professions.

P: Professions, yes. 40 years back my father put in place professional management systems including corporate governance which has been used in the business world today. ... Of course our family owns the majority of

shares and each company has an independent board, supported by a full team of professional managers. Right from CEOs down the line, we guide. (P20 – Advisor – Trade foundation) </DLG>

<H2>Repertoire (4d) – India versus China</H2>

The India versus China repertoire reveals a powerful instance of discursive ‘othering’ on a national level as China is regularly compared to India and found wanting. The repertoire is all the more resonant since it occurred unprompted on several occasions in managers’ accounts as they constructed national identities. This manager draws on a vivid transportation metaphor to cast China as culturally inferior in a way that suggests (unspecified) problems ahead for businesses operating in that country:

<EXT>Doing business in India is like driving along an old, dug up, detoured, speed-bumped road, but one which, if you persevered, would ultimately get you to your destination. Much patience is required but it is a country with progressive policies This is unlike China, for example, which is like a super highway that allows people to get on and go fast, but with no certainty that there won’t be total blocks ahead at some point. (P13 – Director – Software firm) </EXT>

<H2>Repertoire (5a) – Nature of exchange</H2>

Several managers drew on the nature of exchange repertoire to highlight the existence of both social and economic exchange within inter-organizational relationships. These elements of exchange could arguably be said to correspond to traditional and modern views of business practice respectively. For example, the speaker below portrays Indian markets as ‘working on sentiment’, and lists several socially-orientated behaviours by managers that can lead to ‘better (economic) business’:

<EXT>Relationship plays a very important part because Indian markets are, you know, they work more on sentiment. If you have closer relationships with your clients, try and help them in a friendly way, have a cup of coffee with him, I am sure you can get better business. <EXT> (P4 – CEO – Wool importer)

<H1>5. Discussion</H1>

Our discursively-based scrutiny of managers' talk reveals an overlapping range of interpretative repertoires that help to construct Indian marketing managers as accomplished practitioners, able to accommodate a number of complementary, and sometimes competing, discourses of management in (and about) B2B interactions. One theme that emerges in the sense-making practices of the participants is that of a constant negotiation of identity.

A benefit of a discursive approach is that multi-level identity construction can be shown to be an ongoing element of managers' talk, such as the individual (e.g., 'I'), organizational ('we'), national ('Indian companies') and network other ('them') positioning that was evident in interview transcripts. Some examples of such pronoun use can be seen in the talk illustrating Repertoire (i) above, where the participant describes his role ('I') in addressing others' ('these people') desire for a particular certificate not produced in India (a national 'we'); and in Repertoire (3a), where the speaker uses 'we' at the organizational level to construct his 'family business'. The analysis allowed us to determine three notional levels (cf. Wilke and Ritter, 2006) of identity construction in managers' accounts: national, organizational and individual. These identities effectively range from the more macro to the micro level of social actor. The different levels are inter-related, thereby allowing speakers to construct themselves while using an interpretative repertoire that, at first glance, may appear to be functioning at a higher level. Thus organizational (company) identities are nested within the nationally constructed identity of India as a country, and individual (managerial) identities are nested within both organizational and national identities – see Figure 5.2. By evoking different levels of identity in the same segment of talk, managers are able to position themselves, and their firms, as practitioners and organizations with particular attributes, even without explicit reference to their own (nested) roles.

Repertoires seem to be deployed by participants to maintain, defend and potentially exploit particular subject positions or identities in the power imbalances that underpin global supply chain relationships. Rather like a script for relationship management, Indian marketers' repertoire use reflects the agency

afforded by drawing upon different discourses and also, at the same time, the constraints that some of these discourses can bring. Thus participants are found on the one hand using their linguistic toolkits to mould identities in their own terms, while on the other hand appearing to be unable to perceive B2B marketing in terms other than those suggested by the various knowledge systems (or *discourses* – Gee, 2011) circulating in the Indian business context.

Although our study focused mainly on cases of Indian managers' discursive constructions of business relationships, what may be the most interesting aspect of this vignette is what can be concluded about the potential effects of language in (and on) generic B2B marketing practices; this means the dexterity with which individual managers discursively position themselves, their firms and their country by drawing upon a wide range of interpretative repertoires in accounts of relationship management. Using DA, some of the inherent tensions in discursive constructions of managerial selves and trading partners as well as other network members are revealed: constructions which help us to understand more about managerial sense-making, and which have the potential to impact on decision making and ultimately, marketing actions.

<H1>6. Methodological lessons learned</H1>

Our study did not really go as far as we would have liked in redressing the dominant Western perspective prevalent in most studies of business relationships. The methodological constraints faced in gaining access to the talk of Indian managers has meant that compromises have necessarily been made, such as over the predominantly male gender of participants (all but one were men), and, indeed, their relatively elite status. After all, language may be being used as part of the agendas of some quite powerful people (Kwon et al., 2009).

One important aspect of a DA-based approach is that researchers must be as transparent as possible about any co-construction of meaning in the texts under analysis. This means that, where a participant's talk appears to have been directly triggered by the way in which the researcher has framed their question, it is appropriate to acknowledge this in the analysis. Note, for instance, the conversational turn-taking that occurs in three of the segments of talk used to illustrate the exemplar interpretative repertoires in this vignette. Participants draw

on the researcher's input in their talk by co-constructing meaning around their interlocutor's assumptions about what is 'international' and the existence of 'corruption' in examples (i) and (ii), and the leading use of the word 'professions' by one of my co-researchers in example (iii) above.

Given the nuanced nature of DA, the semi-structured interview is a perfectly legitimate data-gathering method in a case study, especially when it is likely that some of the issues discussed about potentially confidential contexts like business relationships may not have been addressed without the specific probing of the interviewer. Nevertheless, there is a tension here since a less structured approach to interviewing may have avoided pressurizing participants into a preconceived response pattern in which the expression of Indian cultural values was seen as inadmissible in response to our inquiries. This could have given managers greater freedom to explain in their own way the contextual factors that they viewed as influencing organizational practices.

Finally, on reflection, it is recognized that on replaying the interview recordings, it appeared that sometimes the Western voice of my co-researchers was heard a little too much in relation to the voices of participants. This resulted in the occasional verbal exchange that revealed much about the nuances of language and the interview process, as well as the cultural assumptions that case researchers can sometimes be guilty of making. Bearing some of these considerations in mind, I conclude with four methodological 'lessons' supported by examples which I hope provide 'food for thought' to fellow discursively-minded B2B scholars who plan to conduct in-depth interviews in cross-cultural contexts.

Lesson One – Beware of leading the participant, especially with an evaluative projection about a network actor or a market. Consider in your analysis what world-view your interlocutor's response may be trying to discursively evoke, and why. For example, note how this manager responds by using the vocabulary of my co-researcher but, by shifting from the particular 'they' to the wider 'anybody', makes a broader point about non-indigenous business peoples' perceptions of India:

<DLG>P: Our partner's problem is, since they haven't visited India, you know they don't really understand the Indian market.

R: Do you think they're frightened of the Indian market?

P: I don't think that anybody needs to be frightened of the Indian market.

(P3 – Director – Timber importer)</DLG>

Lesson Two – Avoid labouring a culturally sensitive point, particularly when the interviewee responds by attempting to minimize the significance of the topic. Furthermore, ponder in your analysis why this discursive struggle is taking place – for instance, is the speaker trying to construct a particular identity? For example, note how this manager claims to be personally ignorant of the issue of superstition, as well as making some wider assertions about the Indian business community, thereby positioning himself as above such things and positioning India as a progressive trading nation:

<DLG>R: What in general should New Zealand be aware of in terms of things like astrology, superstitions?

P: I'm not an expert on that but in general ... people are not superstitious that much, especially people who are involved in big business in India, people are not superstitious.

R: I mean, is there an unlucky number for instance in India?

P: I am sure that there is but I am not aware of it.

R: And what about Indian customs generally? I mean for instance in East Asia white is often the colour of death. What happens in India?

P: There are much smaller issues like that that New Zealanders have to be aware of, but nothing that's very serious or drastic you know. (P15 – Manager – Tourism authority)</DLG>

Lesson Three – Take care not to let your attempts to show local knowledge, however laudable in terms of building empathy, over-ride the discursive self-positioning of your participants. If you do so, then note the significance of their verbal response. For example, see here how the manager is keen to assert his expert, university-trained identity by pointedly correcting my co-researcher:

<DLG>P: I graduated in textile engineering. I am a textile engineer as from Baroda which is in the Western part of India.

R: Yes, famous for gems.

P: Sorry?

R: Isn't it famous for gems, Baroda?

P: Baroda is famous for its university actually. (P4 – CEO – Wool importer)</DLG>

Lesson Four – having cautioned against too much researcher input into conversations, researchers are also advised to be prepared to intervene where necessary in order to illuminate an aspect of local language use that may be confusing. Such interventions may expose some fascinating elements of local attitudes to managing relationships. For example, by probing a little deeper, my co-researcher encourages this participant to reveal the difference between formal and informal aspects of the term 'collaboration' as used in their story about a business relationship that initially was portrayed as 'not working':

<DLG>P: You know, the collaboration ended but still the relation is going on The collaboration and joint venture doesn't work for longer.

R: But sorry, I don't quite understand that. You're saying the collaboration doesn't last?

P: You see, the joint venture and collaboration is short lived, that's what I'm saying. But what is long lived is the understanding, the relationship and continuously complementing each other's business ... So that collaboration is the understanding and I think signing the collaboration agreement has no meaning. (P10 – General Manager – Engineering firm)</DLG>

These sorts of lessons should be borne in mind by researchers seeking to unpack managers' stories in any organizational settings that include different cultural contexts. Nevertheless, handled sensitively, DA can form an important part of the case study process and theory development. In this regard, I argue that a discourse analytic approach is a useful addition to the B2B marketing researcher's armoury in the struggle to make scholarly sense of how managers in turn make sense of their socially constructed world(s).

<TBCAP>Table 5.1 Summary of interpretative repertoires</TBCAP>

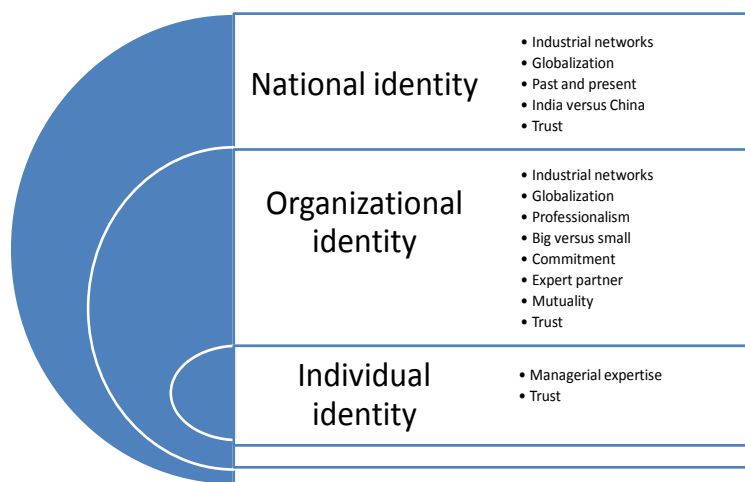
Exemplar segment of talk ('in vivo')	First order theme ('child' repertoire)	Second order theme ('parent' repertoire)	Discursive construction
'...it's about filling the structural holes...' (Participant 11)	a. Networks	1. Networks	Constructs a national identity for India, as well as portraying organizations as network nodes
'...business principles are pretty much the same all across the world' (P13)	a. Accepting globalization	2. Globalization	Evokes a universal sense of business values and practices, and thus identities
'Globalization has tended to find a ... lower level all the time. I don't believe in that ...' (P2)	b. Questioning globalization	2. Globalization	Asserts a distinct national identity for India and for some types of organization
'... now we are interacting with the world things are changing.' (P1)	a. Past and present management practices	3. Past and present management practices	Constructs a changing national identity, but one that not all organizations share
'The Delhi distributor is totally different from a Chennai distributor.' (P14)	a. Local nuances	4. Indian Management systems	Suggests that business practices are not consistent across all Indian firms
'... each company has a board, supported by a full team of professional managers.' (P20)	b. Professionalism	4. Indian Management systems	Associates 'professional' management with modern business practices
'... but small firms, small entrepreneurs, ... their business affairs could be quite different.' (P23)	c. Big versus small	4. Indian Management systems	Again, suggests that business practices are not consistent across all Indian firms
'We are not so far behind China.' (P12)	d. India versus China	4. Indian Management systems	Positions China as wanting when compared to India as a place to do business
'If you try and help them in a friendly way, ... I am sure you can get better business.' (P4)	a. Nature of exchange	5. Relationship management	Evokes existence of both economic and social exchange in inter-organizational relationships
'Indian customers basically look for long-term supplies.' (P1)	b. Commitment	5. Relationship management	Suggests a long-term outlook to relationships is desired by Indian firms
'You can also come across some kind of fly-by-night kind of people.' (P23)	c. Trust	5. Relationship management	Attributes the quality of trustworthiness to nations, organizations and individuals
'And it's a marriage between equals.' (P13)	d. Mutuality	5. Relationship management	Reinforces claims of Indian firms to be seeking mutual benefits
'We know how the market works more than any fruit trader ...' (P7)	e. Expert partner	5. Relationship management	Positions firms as possessing valuable key capabilities or knowledge
'Well basically, I'm a chartered accountant and then MBA finance ...' (P23)	a. Managerial expertise	6. Managerial expertise	Constructs the managerial self as an expert individual

<TS>Source: Ellis et al. (2011)</TS>

<FIGCAP>Figure 5.2 Nested levels of identities in industrial networks: key interpretative repertoires</FIGCAP>

<FIG_SRC>Source: Ellis et al. (2011)</FIGCAP>

Figure 1 - Nested levels of identities in networks: key repertoires



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