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

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Abstract

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

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

Introduction

In a relatively recent editorial in this journal, Dennis Tourish (2015: 137) expressed his concern over the current state of leadership research and lamented that, "[r]esearchers seem content to ask smaller and smaller questions about fewer and fewer issues of genuine

significance, producing statements of the blindingly obvious, the completely irrelevant or the palpably absurd." Remarks like this show that those involved in leadership research are desperately looking for new approaches, new ideas, new questions, as well as new answers to old questions. This is particularly true in critical leadership studies, where researchers aim to "challenge hegemonic perspectives […] that tend both to underestimate the complexity of leadership dynamics and to take for granted that leaders are the people in charge who make decisions, and that followers are those who merely carry out orders from 'above'" (Collinson, 2011: 181).

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

Discourse analytical approaches to leadership

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

Acknowledging the central role of discourse for leadership, discursive leadership is interested in understanding how leadership is *done* in and through discourse. Research in this tradition mainly conducts qualitative case studies (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Whittle et al., 2015; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013), and draws on some of the tools and methods developed by discourse analytic approaches (such as Conversation Analysis (e.g. Clifton, 2006; Svennevig, 2008; Larsson and Lundholm, 2013) and Interactional Sociolinguistics (e.g. Schnurr, 2009b; Vine et al., 2008)). This research largely focuses on analysing the specific discursive processes through which leadership is accomplished at the micro-level of interaction – with the aim of gaining "a better understanding of the everyday practices of talk that constitute leadership and a deeper knowledge of how leaders use language to craft 'reality', construct meaning and contribute to sense-making" (Clifton, 2006: 203; see also Whittle et al., 2015; Sveningson and Larsson, 2006). Hence, discursive leadership, in contrast to much other research on leadership (which often falls under the umbrella of leadership psychology (see also Chen, 2008)), does not attempt "to capture the experience of leadership by forming and statistically analysing a host of cognitive, affective, and conative variables and their casual connections" (Fairhurst, 2007: 15). Instead, discursive leadership research focuses on *lived* rather than *reported* experience – thus often taking a constructivist approach (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2012).

In summarising the current state-of-the-art of discursive leadership research in

business and organisational studies, Larsson (2016: 174) identifies three broad strands of

inquiry: "How a designated leader enacts his or her role; how identities relevant to the

leadership process are constructed in interaction; and what influence and organizing

processes exist in interaction." Research in applied linguistics and pragmatics focuses on

similar topics, albeit with a particular interest in identifying and describing the specific

discursive practices through which leadership is accomplished on the micro-level of an

interaction, and how the various processes to do with influencing and organising are enacted

throughout an interaction. Studies within the latter field of inquiry have, for example,

analysed how leadership is enacted in and through getting things done and assigning tasks to

others (e.g. Schnurr and Mak, 2011; Svennevig, 2008; Darics, 2017; Skovolt, 2015), solving

disagreements and conflict (e.g. Walker and Aritz, 2014; Choi and Schnurr, 2014; Holmes

and Marra, 2004; Saito, 2011), building consensus (Wodak et al., 2011), managing meetings

(e.g. Holmes, 2000; Clifton, 2012; Walker and Aritz, 2014) and acting as chair (e.g. Ford,

2008), decision-making (e.g. Marra et al., 2006), as well as sense-making (Clifton, 2006),

gate-keeping (van de Mieroop and Schnurr, 2014), mentoring (Holmes, 2005), and creating a

positive working atmosphere in a team (e.g. Schnurr, 2009b; Darics, 2017).

Discursive leadership research in both business and organisational studies, as well as

applied linguistics and pragmatics, is characterised by a strong focus on empirical data –

often in the form of audio- and/or video-recordings of interactions. Research conducted in

these disciplines also shares an interest in understanding how leadership is actually *done,* and

– in contrast to much of the earlier mainstream leadership research – rejects attempts to

establish "grand theories of leadership" (Clifton, 2006; Alvesson, 1996). However, in spite of

these shared interests and considerable overlaps, there is currently very little engagement

between scholars in these disciplines. On the contrary, there are only a very few attempts by

those working within the (conceptual and methodological) constraints of one discipline to

critically engage with the work done in the other (see also Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014;

Crevani et al., 2010). This paper aims to address this dilemma and calls for a more engaging,

open, and systematic exchange of ideas and practices between these disciplines. We argue

that such an undertaking is particularly valuable for critical leadership studies as it speaks

directly to their aim "to denaturalize leadership by showing it to be the outcome of an

ongoing process of social construction and negotiation" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 43). In

what follows, we spell out what concrete contributions research in applied linguistics and

pragmatics can make to critical leadership studies by i) contributing to recent debates around

leadership terminologies, and ii) providing alternative methodological approaches which may

help address the current lack of empirical evidence needed to support and underpin

theoretical assumptions and claims. We discuss each of these points in turn.

Recent debates around leadership terminologies

Although leadership has always been a hotly debated topic (Bass, 1981), the discussions

around what is (not) leadership and which terminologies best capture the closely related

issues of power and agency have recently gained momentum (e.g. Kelly, 2008, 2014;

Learmonth & Morrell, 2017; Collinson, 2017), and are central to critical leadership studies

which call for a "re-think[ing of] these dynamics in much more detail and in much more

critical and dialectical ways" (Collinson, 2017: 279). In a recent paper in this journal,

Learmonth and Morrell (2017: 262, 265) lament a generally "unreflexive use of [the terms]

leader and follower" which largely impedes on or even prevents a genuinely "radical critical

analysis" of the power dynamics and agency relationships in today's organisations. In a

response to this, Collinson (2017: 279) emphasises the importance of problematising these

categories "in ways that render transparent the possible tensions, conflicts, ambiguities, contradictions as well as structural antagonisms in leader-follower dynamics, power relations and identities".

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

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

describes some of the (discursive) processes through which this is accomplished – thereby

providing empirical support for currently largely theoretical debates.

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

Context: During a monthly staff meeting at a European office of a British cultural

organisation. The meeting was recorded on the eve of the US-led invasion in Iraq. Andy, the

director, is chairing the meeting; Chris is the project's officer; Debbie is the information and

communications manager, and Betty the assistant director. The 14 other participants do not

contribute to the discussion below. Participants are discussing whether they should be

screening a film called Gas Attack *at the opening night of an upcoming film festival.*

1	Chris:	Er one thing I need t- to get a bit
2		get everyone's opinion for the opening + gala night +
3		one for the core film festival itself on the twenty-first of March
4		er great Scottish film called *Gas Attack*
5		which talks about chemical weapons in Iraq and
6		asylum seeker dispersal programmes //in the UK\
7	Debbie:	/We tried it\\ last year but //didn't\
8	Chris:	/Hhh\\ so extremely hot topic
9		(0.5)
10	Chris:	But
11	Andy:	//On the twenty-first?\
12	Betty:	/I think\\ I think we may need to run that one past + //er\
13	Chris:	/We\\ might need t- to run it past //a few people first\

14   Betty: /I think we'd better\\ check + we need to make sure

15   we're getting strong support from er from headquarters

Right from the beginning of the excerpt, it is noteworthy that the leadership in this team is

distributed among team members, and that it is not necessarily the most senior person and

official chair (i.e. Andy) who takes on a leadership role. On the contrary, at this point in the

meeting it is Chris, the project's officer, who introduces a new topic and invites contributions

from the other team members on whether they should screen a potentially controversial

movie at the opening night of the upcoming gala. Although Chris is not the chair or officially

designated "leader" of the team, he takes on a leadership role here, and by explicitly asking

for "everyone's opinion" (line 2), he right from the start sets up the decision-making about

this particular issue as a shared activity. However, he does so in a way that enables him to

still maintain the ownership of the decision (as reflected, for example, in his choice of the

first person singular pronoun "I" (line 1)). So, at this point in the discussion, Chris is clearly

the one in charge: he brings up a new topic to be discussed at this point in the meeting (i.e.

whether to screen *Gas Attack*), he holds the floor for a comparatively long time (e.g. as

reflected in the number of words that he utters compared to the subsequent contributions),

and he invites others to express their opinions. If we view leadership as a sense-making

process (Pye, 2005; Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and as an exercise of

influence (Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), based on

this evidence we could say that Chris here claims a leadership role by positioning himself as

being responsible for this particular issue. This interpretation is further supported in the next

two lines where he overlaps with Betty (lines 7 and 8), thereby preventing her from finishing

her turn in speaking, in which she refers to another (presumably related) incident that

happened in the previous year (note her use of the inclusive first person plural pronoun "we" here, emphasising collective responsibility).

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

These observations challenge static leader-follower dichotomies and, instead, convincingly illustrate that, in this team, leadership is a distributed activity based on team members' expertise rather than hierarchical standing within the organisation. This relatively short excerpt provides empirical evidence to illustrate some of the tensions that often arise due to the theoretical dichotomisation of the terms "leader" and "follower" (Collinson, 2017;

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Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). The kind of analysis conducted above problematises such a

dichotomisation by showing that different people take on different roles throughout a

discussion, and that even "ordinary" team members – who are often referred to as "followers"

(e.g. Bligh, 2011), "collaborators" (Rost, 1995 in Uhl-Bien, 2006) or "partners" (Uhl-Bien et

al., 2000 in Uhl-Bien, 2006) in the business and organisational sciences literature – take an

active role (as reflected throughout an interaction; for example, by introducing a new topic,

interrupting (and taking over from) the official chair, taking and holding the floor, and using

inclusive pronouns ("we"), etc. If we view leadership as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005;

Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and as an exercise of influence

(Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), this kind of analysis

enables us to identify and trace how these activities are enacted on the micro-level throughout

the interaction (even beyond the short excerpt shown above), and how, on a turn-by-turn

basis, team members participate in the leadership processes – for instance by initiating new

topics, making contributions to move the discussion forward, interrupting and overlapping

with others to gain the floor, thereby actively deciding whose voice gets heard and whose

contributions are reflected and incorporated into the final decision.

The demonstrated "messiness" in which these diverse processes take place during an

interaction provides empirical evidence of how complex leadership processes are, and how

they are shared (although not necessarily equally!), and how as a consequence leadership is

co-produced among interlocutors. Observations like these, thus provide important evidence to

support claims that the theoretically constructed antagonisms in leader-follower dynamics are

highly problematic (Collinson, 2017), as they often cannot be upheld in empirical

investigations of actual practice. Such analyses, thereby, also contribute to attempts to

"denaturalise leadership" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 46) as proposed by critical leadership

studies, as they enable researchers to identify and describe the specific (discursive) processes

through which leadership is continuously constructed and negotiated among interlocutors

throughout an interaction, rather than conceptualising it as an a priori characteristic or a trait

associated with a particular person or position. It is precisely in this respect that research in

applied linguistics and pragmatics has much to offer to critical leadership studies.

The next example further illustrates this, by demonstrating that the construction and

negotiation of leadership is not always necessarily harmonious, and not every attempt at

claiming a leadership role is successful. Rather, as recent theoretical contributions in critical

leadership studies acknowledge, situated power relations are socially constructed, and are not

always rationalised or reinforced, but may also sometimes be challenged and resisted (e.g.

Collinson, 2014, 2017). Our analyses below illustrate how this can be captured analytically

by drawing on some of the tools and processes regularly used in applied linguistics and

pragmatics research.

Example 2 (from Schnurr, 2009b)

Context: During a meeting of the senior management team at an IT company in New Zealand

with Neil, an external HR consultant. At this point in the meeting, Neil presents his vision for

managing staff turnover in the company, which is one of the issues for which the company

requires his consultation services. Neil's plans are based on a distinction between two types

of staff turnover, as he outlines in the excerpt below. Shaun is a senior manager and Victor,

the CEO of the company.

1   Neil: So what I've got in here for top talent

2   is retention of top talent

3   and reduction and regrettable turnover

4   i.e. redundancies

5   Shaun: Regrettable turn- //[laughs]\

6   Victor: /[laughs]\\

7   Neil: /Regrettable turn I mean re- I mean re\\

8   Victor: Do we regret this person leaving

9   No no //(get rid of them)\

10   Shaun: /[laughs]\\ //[laughs]\

11   Neil: /[laughs]\\

12   Victor: It's not very sensitive is it

13   All: [laugh]

If, like in the example above, we understand leadership as a sense-making process or an

exercise of influence, Neil's initial outline of his vision of how to tackle the issue of staff

turnover at the company (in lines 1–4) could be interpreted as claiming a leadership role. By

attempting to specify how he plans to solve the company's problem of high staff turnover,

Neil sets himself up as being in charge of this particular issue (note also his choice of first

person singular pronoun "I" in "what I've got in here" (line 1)), thus taking a central role in

the team's sense-making process and aiming to influence others to change their behaviour

according to his vision. However, he does not get very far, as his explanations are interrupted

by some of the members of the senior management team. In line 5 Shaun, one of the senior

managers in the company, makes fun of Neil's distinction between different types of staff

turnover. This criticism together with the subsequent laughter, which is joined by Victor, the

CEO and most senior member of the team, are potentially face-threatening and express Shaun

and Victor's criticism and rejection of Neil's suggestion. Interrupting and challenging Neil at

this early stage in the discussion can also be seen as an expression of the senior management team's resistance towards his approach more generally.

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

This short excerpt provides evidence for Collinson's (2017: 280) claim that "despite their subordination, followers can often find ways to resist". Similar observations, which further problematise often taken-for-granted "structural antagonisms in leader-follower dynamics" (Collins, 2017: 279), are made in a case study of Cheryl, a newly promoted team leader in a large multinational corporation in Hong Kong (Schnurr and Zayts, 2011). This study shows that many of Cheryl's repeated claims for leadership, and her attempts to construct herself as the one in charge in the team's weekly meetings, are not supported but rather challenged by the other team members, who, in turn, claim a leadership role for themselves. This is reflected, for example, when they disagree with or ignore Cheryl's advice and suggestions, when they engage in discussions without her participation, and when they

dominate the decision-making and meeting management (see also Chan et al., fc). Cases like

Cheryl and Neil show that "contestation is central to situated leader-follower dynamics"

(Collinson, 2017: 280), and that "followers" often play a more active (and more critical) role

in leadership than assumed in much of the business and organisational sciences research.

Analyses of actual interactions, like the ones conducted here, enable researchers to

trace the specific processes through which leadership claims are made and responded to (by

ratifying or resisting them) throughout an interaction, thus providing important empirical

evidence to support current theoretical debates around terminological issues. Such analyses

enable researchers to actually show how leadership – as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005;

Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and an exercise of influence (Fairhurst,

2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013) – is indeed a continuous

process of (discursive) construction and negotiation (Fairhurst, 2008, 2009) that does not

reside within individual persons or positions, but is rather co-produced among interlocutors.

In the next section we start to explore some of the methodological implications of these

claims by critically discussing how we should research leadership with the aim of gaining

further insights into "the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership" (Alvesson &

Spicer, 2014: 53) that critical leadership studies so urgently call for.

How can and should we research leadership?

As we have seen in the examples and discussions in the previous section, one area where

research in applied linguistics and pragmatics is particularly strong is in its ability to identify,

trace and eventually capture the specific processes through which leadership roles and

identities are claimed and enacted, as well as responded to, by focusing on the moment-by-

moment unravelling of an interaction. By drawing on specific discourse analytical tools and

processes, insights into the *actual* practice(s) of leadership are gained – as opposed to the

recounted perceptions or post-experience evaluations often used by research conducted in

leadership psychology (see e.g. Fairhurst, 2007; Chen, 2008). But what are the

methodological implications of such an approach? How should we design our research

studies, what kinds of data should we aim to collect, and how should we process them in

order to generate findings that help us address some of the terminological issues outlined

above? We believe that the methodological approaches of current leadership research

conducted in applied linguistics and pragmatics have much to offer in this respect.

One of the few research papers that outlines the specific processes through which

leadership discourse can (and should) be researched is Clifton (2006), who provides a

comprehensive overview of the various steps involved in such an emic approach to

leadership. Following standard practice in Conversation Analysis, the first step is the

collection of data, which "should not be guided by a priori research theories" (Clifton, 2006:

205). Step 2 is the transcription of the data to illustrate "the machinery of the talk" and to put

the data into analysable form (Clifton, 2006: 205), which is then followed by the analysis,

which should be data driven and focus on themes that emerge from the data (rather than those

that have been pre-selected by the researcher). This final step in a Conversation Analysis

approach should consider both the structure of the talk as well as its wider implications.

Although these steps are very comprehensive, we would like to make a few additional

suggestions. Firstly, with regards to step 1, we believe it is important to be clear about the

object of study: is the study going to focus on a priori identified leaders (i.e. specific persons

or positions), thereby potentially upholding the problematic dichotomies of leaders and

followers discussed above; or is it going to explore the various processes of leadership

(however defined), thereby moving away from person-centred approaches? The answer to

this question has not only conceptual and analytical implications (as discussed above), but

has also several methodological consequences, since this decision impacts on what

interactional data should be collected – i.e. data involving a specific person or an entire team

or communicative event. While a focus on individuals in leadership positions can be

operationalised relatively easily in terms of methodology (for example, by shadowing and

audio/video-recoding a designated individual over a specific period of time; as, for example,

in Schnurr 2009b), the latter focus involves several methodological challenges, such as

identifying ways of collecting data that capture the contributions of the various people who

may potentially be involved in doing leadership.

One concrete way of obtaining data to gain insights into the complexities of

leadership by moving away from the dichotomies of leaders and followers is through

following a particular project (rather than individuals) and gathering data from different

angles to try to capture the various stages and aspects of the project (as in Choi and Schnurr,

2014). This involves acknowledging that leadership takes place outside well-researched

business meetings, and that analysing a wider array of different kinds of interactional

contexts – such as one-to-one interactions, emails, whatsapp messages, blogs, telephone

conversations, etc. (e.g. Darics, 2017; Schnurr and Mak, 2011; Skovholt, 2015) – is crucial, if

we want to gain genuinely new insights into the dynamics of leadership.

A second point to add to Clifton's (2006) step-by-step approach refers to the third step

regarding the analysis of the data. In analysing such potentially diverse datasets – including

spoken, written and multimodal data – and adopting a data-driven approach that allows

themes to emerge, guiding questions should not necessarily be: "Who is the leader?" and

"How are they doing leadership?"; but rather: "Where is leadership happening?", "Who is

participating in these processes (and who is not)?", "How is this (discursively and usually

collectively) accomplished?", and "What responses do the various claims at leadership

generate?". Such an approach, exploring these questions and moving away from being

person-centred, directly speaks to recent conceptualisations of leadership as co-produced and

located in relations and interactions (e.g. Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). In this way,

researchers are able to identify and describe the discursive processes through which

leadership is collectively (although not necessarily always in harmony) constructed and

negotiated among interlocutors. This approach is also be in line with critical leadership

studies, which often "challenge the hegemonic view that leaders are the people in charge and

followers are the people who are influenced" (Jackson and Parry, 2011: 95; Uhl-Bien, 2006;

Alvesson, 1996). Example 3 illustrates this further.

Example 3 (from Mak and Lee, 2015; modified transcriptions)[1]

Context: Instant messaging exchange between two colleagues, Charles and Ricky, who work

at an electronics holdings company in Hong Kong. Ricky has just returned from meeting with

a business partner at another company.

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

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[1] Spelling and grammar has been left as in the original.
[2] 'Cif' is an abbreviation of "cost, insurance, freight", which refers to an agreement, according to which the seller has to arrange/pay for specific items as part of the trade deal.

10   Charles: lets' talk to Samuel first

11   Ricky: really fuck him off

12   Charles: Relax

13   you are not alone

In approaching this excerpt for analysis with the questions outlined above, one could begin

by identifying some of the utterances in which leadership is taking place. If we view

leadership as a sense-making process (Pye, 2005; Grisoni & Beeby, 2007; Smircich &

Morgan, 1982) or as an exercise of influence (Fairhurst, 2008; Alvesson & Spicer, 2014;

Larsson & Lundholm, 2013), we could argue that leadership is happening at several places

during this relatively short excerpt. For example, throughout the interaction, both Charles and

Ricky are collaboratively trying to make sense of Ricky's recent encounter with a business

partner. Initially, Charles invites his colleague to report back on this recent business meeting

(line 1), before giving some concrete and relatively explicit – even if humorous – advice on

what Ricky should do (using the relatively direct formulation 'you should' (line 6)). By

trying to influence Ricky's future actions (i.e. by using the imperative formulations to "talk to

Samuel first" (line 10) and "relax" (line 12)), Charles at the same time claims a leadership

role for himself, which is legitimised by Ricky, as his cooperative and affirmative responses

indicate. Ricky provides the requested information (lines 2–5) and complies with Charles'

advice and suggestion for future action by giving more information (lines 8 and 9) and

repeating his frustration over the meeting (line 11).

    This analysis shows, once again, that leadership is a collaborative activity (e.g. as

reflected in Ricky and Charles' conjoint sense-making and negotiation of meaning), and

leadership roles do not reside in individuals or positions. They are, instead, claimed and

dynamically negotiated among interlocutors as an interaction unfolds. These observations

provide further evidence in support of critical leadership studies' rejection of hegemonic views of leaders and followers, and they also demonstrate that, if we really want to gain insights into "the dirty and depressing everyday work of leadership" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014: 53) that critical leadership studies call for, we need to rethink our methodological approach and move away from a focus on individual "leaders" (and "followers"). These binary categories – especially when assigned a priori – are too static and limiting to describe the diversity and perhaps messiness of leadership in situ. Clearly, leadership claims – especially when understood as negotiating meaning and sense-making processes – can be made by anyone – not just those in specific positions or with particular job titles – and they can be responded to in a variety of ways – either being accepted and reinforced, or resisted and challenged.

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

Towards a more open and engaging dialogue

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

Focusing on these two aspects, we have analysed three examples of leadership discourse to illustrate what could be gained by such an approach. Our analyses have identified and described some of the concrete discursive processes through which leadership is shared and co-produced among different people throughout an interaction, and how, by portraying themselves in particular ways (e.g. as being particularly knowledgeable (Example 1) or innovative and having the answer to a problem (Example 2)), different individuals make claims for leadership, which are then responded to by others who may affirm (Example 3) or reject (Example 2) these claims. Such an analysis of the collaborative construction and

negotiation of leadership – on a turn-by-turn basis as an interaction unfolds (Clifton, 2006, 2012) – has also provided evidence for claims that these processes do not always occur harmoniously and that, in fact, not every attempt at leadership is successful (Examples 1 and 2). Rather, situated power relations are socially constructed, and do not always necessarily get rationalised or reinforced, but may also sometimes be challenged and resisted (e.g. Collinson, 2014, 2017).

In addition to providing empirical evidence to feed into current theoretical debates, a more systematic and open engagement with research in applied linguistics and pragmatics could also lead to a rethinking of methodological and analytical issues with the aim of facilitating and supporting attempts to capture the "everyday work of leadership" that Alvesson and Spicer (2104: 53) and other critical leaderships scholars call for. Such an engagement could lead, as we have suggested, to a rethinking of methodological approaches and a new set of analytical questions. Based on conceptualisations of leadership as co-constructed, shared, resisted, contested, and continuously (but not necessarily harmoniously) negotiated in and through interaction, guiding questions for an enhanced analysis could take a more exploratory form and would stimulate more data-driven conceptualisations of leadership processes, rather than being constrained by a priori – and often person- or position-centred – assumptions. Such questions could include: "Where is leadership (in the plural) happening?", "Who is participating in leadership (and who is not)?", "How are power dynamics and agency enacted and negotiated among a team?", "How (as well as by whom and to what effect) are situated power relations either reinforced or challenged?", "How is this (discursively and usually collectively (although not necessarily harmoniously)) accomplished?", and "What responses do the various claims at leadership generate?". These questions directly address (and largely avoid) problematic leader-follower dichotomies which often form the basis of leadership research in business and organisational sciences.

Although the focus of this paper was on several concrete issues relating to theoretical

and conceptual debates, as well as the methodological and analytical approaches that current

leadership scholarship are grappling with, the ideas and discussions presented here could

equally well be applied to other issues. For example, they could bring fresh air to some of the

discussions around relational leadership. Drawing on some of the tools and processes

illustrated in the analyses in this paper could, thus, also lead to new insights into the

"relational dynamics by which leadership is developed" and the specific processes and

dynamics through which "relationships form and develop" – which are two main avenues for

future research for relational leadership outlined by Uhl-Bien (2006: 672). Research

conducted within applied linguistics and pragmatics may also help in addressing many of the

other questions currently on the research agenda for relational leadership, including "How do

effective leadership relationships develop, and […] what are the relational processes that

comprise effective collective relational leadership practice?" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2012: 312).

Due to the widely acknowledged central role that language and communication play in the

formation and development of relationships, the discourse analytical tools and processes

regularly used by researchers in applied linguistics and pragmatics seem particularly geared

to advance thinking around these issues – by "reveal[ing] how previously 'abstract'

constructs can be made visible in talk" (Clifton, 2006: 217; Kelly, 2008), as showcased in the

analyses above.

There are endless possibilities of where research in applied linguistics and pragmatics

could make important contributions to current leadership scholarship across disciplines. This,

to date, largely overlooked research should, therefore, be taken more seriously, and a

concerted effort should be made to more systematically and enthusiastically engage with this

"other" branch of leadership research. It clearly has the potential to become a valuable ally in

the endeavour to challenge hegemonic perspectives and to denaturalise leadership, thereby

bringing much needed fresh air to the current state of leadership research.

While the examples and arguments presented in this paper have inevitably been

influenced by our own research and our own thinking, we hope that future research may find

some of them useful and will take up and address some of the issues identified here. We

agree with Uhl-Bien et al. (2012: 319) that this "is an exciting time to be in leadership

research", and we believe that a more engaging, open and systematic exchange of ideas

between different fields of leadership research will enable us to address the conceptual,

analytical and methodological challenges that leadership research is currently facing.

Transcription conventions

[laughs]   paralinguistic features in square brackets

+   pause of up to one second

… // …\   simultaneous speech

… / … \\

(are)   transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance

?   rising or question intonation

[drawls] : … :   drawling of words in between the colons

( )   unclear utterance

(0.5)   pause of 0.5 seconds

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