Framing Organization: The Construction of Discourse Among Slovenian Trade Union Officials

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Abstract

The paper focuses on discourse and discourse analysis as a tool for shedding light on the phenomena of trade union recruitment and organization. The author employs discursive data from interviews with numerous trade union officials in Slovenia as a means of shedding light on the process of organizational sense-making, identifying the specific terms officials employ to describe the world of Slovenian trade unionism and trade union organizing. In her analysis, the author argues that age seems to be the most significant factor distinguishing the perspectives among the interviewed officials, pointing thus to the significance of generational changes for understanding the challenges to trade union organizing in Slovenia today.

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Introduction

This paper focuses on discourse and discourse analysis as a tool for shedding light on the issues of trade union recruitment and organisation, briefly outlining what discourses are and how discourses operate. This does not involve an overly strong emphasis on discourse theory, but instead foreground discursive data. The data upon which this analysis is based comprises excerpts from interviews with numerous trade union officials in Slovenia collected as part of a two year comparative research project undertaken together with Adam Mrozowicki, Triin Roosalu and Reka Geambrasu[1].

Why discourse? Many may argue that discourses are abstract and are not linked to the 'real world' and that focusing on discourses instead of helping can actually hinder understanding the real world, which is reduced to 'just words'. Yet are discourses 'just words'? We will employ the following narrative segment to address this question. One of my interlocutors, whom I shall refer to as NB[2], is a male trade union trustee in his mid – 40s working in a relatively sucessful automotive factory in Slovenia. NB has been working in this factory for almost his entire working career and been a member of the same trade union during this entire period. As a 'regular' member he often turned to trade unions when he had trouble with his superiors, and at the time of the interview, he had completed little over 10 years of experience as a trade union trustee. Below is his answer to one of the questions our research team asked all our interlocutors concerning the problems and challenges that they dealt with on a daily basis as trade union officials.

[2] This discussion is based on a representative sample of interviews collected for the above-mentioned project. Each interviewee is given a set of initials in order to project his or her identity.

...Well, the biggest problem are my co-workers, right: explaining to them that the trade union is important, getting certain persons on the right path ... those that are still under the influence of management ... for whom the trade union means nothing, right. ... They basically form groups and then that one who is alongside also turns against the trade unions... That person is so influential that he converts the entire group – numerous people, despite the fact that they are trade union members and all that... It is necessary to convert those, the loud ones, right, and then get them on the right path. Well, these are the biggest problems. You always have someone inside who exerts some influence as a person because he is loud and chooses the right words and attracts some people to him. (NB)

The first part of NB's answer is not surprising, as it may be the answer that many trustees may provide, given the fact that the role of trustees involves interacting with workers on a daily basis. Yet the answer 'co-workers' could have been linked to a number of different issues. What does BN mean when he mentions his 'co-worker' problem? Whom does he single out of the co-workers as a problem? For him 'problem' co-workers are those who are influential, so influential that they can turn whole groups of people against the trade unions, even trade union members. He also argues that their influence is based on the fact that they are loud and that they choose the right words – this combination seems to attract persons, who become 'converted'. For a trade union trustee such as NB, who within the trade union is often responsible for recruitment at the ground level, having the wrong kind of 'influential' workers with a gift for words can hinder recruitment of new members as well as problematize the relationship between a trustee and trade union members.

Words thus can be significant, can be influential, and do matter. The very use of the word 'problem' can provide an example. Carol Lee Bacchi argued, 'talking about something as a problem has a whole range of implications which need to be thought about (1999: 5, emphasis ours). What are the implications of defining something as a problem? Or categorizing someone as a 'problem'? A 'problem' child, a 'problem' student, or even a 'problem' worker. One can view this as a category, a label, a reputation – however in all cases the categorization implies a set of connections or associations, most of which in this case are negative. In addition, the act of defining something or someone as a problem is a strategy of definition, or more precisely, of association, linking someone who was otherwise 'normal' with all that is associated with the concept of 'problem' or 'problematic'.

Defining something or someone as a problem is a relational act that links something or someone to other ideas and concepts or, in other words, places them in a particular context or frame (Frege and Kelly 2003). The study of discursive

frames or of framing practices is based on the argument that the ways that the world is defined and expressed are not self-evident processes to be taken for granted but are the result of human agency instead. In this vein Derek Edwards (1991) described discursive strategies as social practice and action carried with the aid of language. There has been a great deal of research conducted on discourse and discursive strategies across numerous disciplines, each with its particular emphases of research and methodology[3] this variety of inquiry is linked together by a focus on the different strategies speakers employ in practice to link certain ideas and categories to each other in diverse ways.

Nevertheless, attention to discourse does not imply reducing social reality and the challenges of social life to a question of linguistic strategies and word games, though discourse analysis runs the risk of being portrayed in this manner when it focuses on discourses removed from the contexts in which we find them. Discourses and the persons who employ them do not operate in a vacuum; instead, they often co exist with other groups, each with their own interests or their particular stagies for making sense of and shaping reality. To this end they employ multiple discourses that may operate as conflicting, counterposing or overlapping systems of meaning and in doing so they employ considerable amount of power and effort in order to further them as convincing representations of reality. This is a potentially important issue that is at the forefront of discursive analyses in the case of trade unions and trade union officials, who continually operate in a context in which other actors – primarily employers and state representatives – have at their disposal powerfully effective discursive strategies and systems of meaning. In situations characterized by strong and conflicting intererests such as those in which trade unions often find themselves, the issue of who holds power is also expressed through words and discourse.

What can discursive analysis provide? At the very least, it can facilitate an awareness of the terms and concepts that trade union officials employ concerning a particular issue in a range of contexts. This implies identifying their collective public vocabulary (Andsager 2000; Condit 1980; Hirsh and Fiss 2005), in other words, the narrative resources, concepts and taken-for-granted associations that they employ in different contexts. This level of reflexivity can then enable exploring how they make sense of and argue certain issues vis a vis different publics and their range of effectiveness.

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[3] The range of research based on discourse analysis is an important issue but the presentation of which falls outside the focus of the argument portrayed in this essay – for this reason we will not be addressing here the range and breadth of discourse-based research in an extended manner.

Interview Collection and Analysis

The interviews analyzed in this essay were conducted with trade union officials as part of an interview research project across numerous countries concerning trade union trends and developments in new EU member states. The research team interviewed a range of trade union actors from the automotive and retail sectors, conducting both biographical and expert interviews. For the purpose of this analysis of organization discourse, I chose a sample from among the interviewees that would respect existing diversity of gender, age and position within the trade union hierarchy so as to provide an overview of possible speaker positions among trade union officials. An analysis of their narratives would then provide the basis for identifying the common terms they employ when talking about the issue of organization.

Upon choosing the sample, I began identifying all interview passages in which the issue of organization arose, organization meaning either member recruitment or activation. Each passage was analyzed by mapping out how the narrator links concepts or themes and the nature of this connection – association, caual connection, opposition. These links were then also classified as to whether the narrator defined them in positive, negative or neutral terms. This system of classification enabled the researcher to engage the concepts and discursive themes beyond the format and circumstances in which they were narrated.

Upon carefully analyzing the passages from the interviews, I compiled a list of discursive themes that speakers would employ in their interviews in associated with the issue of organization. This became a core list of themes in accordance to which I read through all the passages, registering which speakers mentioned the chosen themes. The table provided below, matching up themes with each of the interviewees (identified by a set of initials), their gender and their age (young/old). The table provides us with a discursive overview of all the interviewees, and of the range of discursive concepts they employed when talking about organization issues. In addition, it also represents the basis for developing questions concerning the commonly held relationships among common themes.

**Table 1. Discursive overview of the interviewees,
and the range of discursive concepts employed**

	DC	MK	MPM	VS	DS	SP	DK	BN	
Gender	m	f	f	f	m	m	m	m	
Age (y/o)	y	y	o	o	y	o	y	y	
transition socialism-capitalism				x		x	x		4
TU hierarchy		x	x			x	x		4
working relationship among TUs			x		x	x	x		4
employer greed/exploitation	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	8
worker dissatisfaction	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		7
short-term/unrealistic expectations of TU	x	x	x	x	x	x			6
service relationship as recruitment	x	x	x	x		x	x		6
worker problems with management as isolation	x	x	x	x		x		x	6
standing together/ inter-connectedness	x		x	x	x	x		x	6
collective effectiveness in face of conflict/ change			x	x	x	x		x	5
TU success as recruit. strategy	x			x		x	x	x	5
passivity	x		x			x	x	x	5
lack of knowledge/interest				x	x	x	x		4
individualism	x		x	x				x	4
opportunism				x		x	x	x	4
worker fear/exposure	x		x					x	3
aggressivity/fight for rights	x				x	x			3
defence of worker rights	x		x	x					3
being active = helping people				x		x		x	3
socialist TU mentality				x		x	x		3
present employment trends/ precarious/ flexibilization			x	x		x			3
resistance								x	1
crisis of values				x					1
ethnicity									

The Case of Slovenian Trade Union Officials

In their narratives our Slovene interlocutors spoke about organization primarily either in the context of their own experiences of membership and activation or as a problem for the trade unions, one often set in motion by a series of changes. Our older Slovenian interlocutors would express these changes as having been set in motion by Slovenia's transition and independence from Yugoslavia. For example, SP, an older trade union official and president of a trade union in the automotive sector, narrated this change in the following fashion:

> *At that time it was already known that to some degree a very, I would say, harsh capitalism was coming to Slovenia, right, and it would be necessary to organize ourselves a little differently, and that primarily rights would become very interesting... it began in the direction of loss of rights... At that time we realized that trade unions were re-organizing too slowly, right, and that they are changing directions too slowly. It was also true that this was the case with the workers. It was also hard to change people, they are like this even today. For example, we recruit members most easily if we get some good discounts somewhere for our members, right, because they see the benefits the next day, right. Long-term interests, people accept them with greater difficulty... And it was different then, for example a TU official came to talk to the director, at that time they were almost equals, it was during the time of socialism... Afterwards the director would not have any time, you couldn't have a good dialogue, he does not want to listen to you. 'We are the owners, we will do things our way, what does it matter to us... profit is important, right, and so on. We are not a social institution, right, we cannot deal with invalids, we cannot deal with workers' problems, this is not our problem, right, this is the state's problem... the state will deal with this, we will keep working, right?* (SP)

In this narrative, SP presents a frame for the discursive theme that is shared by all our Slovene interlocutors: the theme of employer greed or exploitation. He draws a causal connection between the rise of a harsh form of capitalism and the emergence of the greedy employer as well as between the rise of a harsh capitalism, the loss of worker rights, and the need to re-organize trade unions.

Organization is thus represented as a reaction or set of reactions to systemic change, and the issues or 'problems' of organization are associated primarily then with the ways or degrees to which trade unions, their officials and workers or trade union members have reacted to the changed situation. In the passage above, one can read how SP negatively evaluates trade unions as re-organizing or 'changing directions' too slowly, characterizing workers in much the same terms: that workers both in the past and now are also not 'changing', that their expectations of the trade unions are out-dated. In addition, SP also presents as an often-mentioned problem that workers' understanding of membership is based on short-term instead of long-term benefits. Another final problem that SP mentions concerns the shift in relationship between trade union officials and employers that he narrates as having been previously egalitarian in nature and characterized by dialogue. SP describes employers as having reset the balance of power between employers and trade unions as well as the form and content of the interactions between them.

SP's narrative is interesting in the case of this discussion because of the number of commonly held themes he includes as well as the frame or big picture he paints in order to make sense of the changes to trade unionism. In this excerpt, one can thus identify a number of the themes listed in the table: transition from socialism to capitalism, employer greed, short-term expectations of workers, and the promotion of service relationship between trade union and its members as a method of recruitment. SP, as all other interviewees, weaves together a narrative in which meaning is defined by context, by the linking together of diverse concepts in varied ways. The meaning of these themes thus varies – in some cases more than in others – in accordance to the narrative context in which they are placed. Thus, when one analyzes numerous interviews one not only registers the common themes that speakers employs, but also any discernable patters that significantly link or distinguish members of the chosen group.

In the case of Slovenia, age (as opposed to gender or economic sector) seems to be the factor the defines the most significant distinction among the interviewees. On the one hand, age is linked to a membership problem framed by some of our interviewees as a demographic issue due to the fact that there are many more workers retiring who were trade union members than workers entering the work force that are becoming trade union members. The reasons behind this are to a great extent linked to the flexibilization of the contemporary Slovene workforce. This could be interpreted as an 'objective' reason for the demographic slide in members. However, upon reading the interviews, it becomes clear that age is also linked to particular understandings of trade union membership and of the role of diverse actors (i.e., workers and trade

union members/officials) in trade unionism itself. Thus, age may also be framed as an organization issue linked to the varied experiences of older and younger trade union officials and members.

One example of this distinction concerns the way that younger trade union members frame their operations in recruitment on the assumption that one does not take membership for granted. DS, a young trustee in a factory in the automotive sector relates that in his factory trustees must 'hunt' for new members. Each new recruit is the result of considerable effort, and trade union actions can quickly cause people to sign out. In the following excerpt DS narrates such an incident that arose during negotiations with management for a Christmas bonus in the following excerpt:

> We came with a particular proposal: 'this, this, this, this is how much we want for the Christmas bonus, we want for every working day, that will be completed this much extra money, and so on'... They said no... We said, 'OK, then let's go'..and all of a sudden someone from the other trade union, in effect the oldest, he will be going to pension soon, thank goodness because um...this person is... I think... I will said it like this: corrupt. At least that is my, my impression is like this. So he stands up and says: 'No! Maybe we spoke too soon, and you, maybe you set your limit too low, let us postpone this meeting for a week and maybe by then you will have found a bit'.. Well, we met again the following week but we no longer were talking about our proposal but only about theirs and the disbursement of payment... in certain situations you have to be really decisive, which these older ones ... because of the meager size of the Christmas bonus people were so disappointed that they were beginning to sign out of the trade union. In the span of two weeks we lost 50 members... (DS.)

DS in relating this particular incident directly links the 'meagre' Christmas bonus to people signing out of the trade union, a bad result that he narrates as being due to actions of certain older negotiators who espoused a negotiation method based on dialogue and consensus, which in DS's mind is not 'decisive' enough. Younger trade union officials have an understanding of the relationship between trade unions employers that is based on a conflict of interest often framed in terms of the greed of the employer. This conflict of interest is accepted as the frame of operation for trade unions, and forms of organization that stem from the earlier traditions of trade unionism are in this particular frame evaluated at the very least as ineffective, at worst as morally questionable, as DS implies above. The fact that 'failure to deliver'

can effectively affect membership levels represents an additional incentive for young officials. Working within such a frame of mind, it is not surprising that younger trade union members narrate the collective bargaining process and ideal trade unionist behaviour within a discursive framework of decisiveness and even aggression.

Thus, for younger officials successes are understood as attracting members; the focus on what trade unions could 'achieve' for their members represents what, according to the table, is a relatively common discursive theme for our interviewees. This aids – albiet unintentionally – in strengthening tendencies towards a service relationship between trade unions and their members, which moves away from what my older interlocutors defined as the ideal relationship between trade unions and their members, often referred to as 'standing together'. In such a scenario, the dimensions of organization understood both as membership and as activation are separated. This is compounded by the prevalence of what VS, an older trade union official and trade union president in a national retail chain, defines as a philosophy of individualism among younger workers:

> *Young people do not know what trade unions are. And in fact, they do not have an opinion about them nor any need for it because of the system, the form of life and the education received at home... Some people are (sigh) how shall I say that so that you will understand me, they are raised in this spirit: think only of yourself, so that you will do well, that you will achieve something. In short, a very... egoistic approach. They raised us differently, maybe this was an expression of the fact that the trade union movement is received differently now. Everyone thinks more about themselves and they do not feel anything. I see for example my experiences when people become employed in Mercator and I... I send the letter introducing the work of the trade union, I send an application form and I invite them up for a discussion. And for example these masters students, they say to me, what is the trade union, what is this, but this is from the time of socialism. I tell you: they come to me completely uninterested. No thank you, they say, this is now a voluntary decision. But then, for example, after a while, when certain problems arise, they come and ask, how much time can they extend my contract, will I receive the same contract, or how many vacation days, and I say, sweetheart, that is a trade union question. How can I tell you all this, if you don't need the trade union? That is how it is, or: my boss treats me unfairly, we have mobbing, can you help me? In short, something needs to happen before they start thinking about the trade union. That is how it is, and the biggest challenge now for the trade unions is to get new young members.* (VS)

VS makes a strong distinction between the young and old generations of workers and of members, describing the younger generation as armed with a high-level education but lacking 'proper' knowledge and experience. In addition, she characterizes the young generation as espousing a philosophy of individualism, which in her framing is set in opposition to the spirit of trade unions. It is only when these young people run into problems that they turn to her. In her responses, she tries to reframe their questions and enter into dialogue with them, trying to get them to understand that the problems they have do not solely concern them as individuals, but they are issues that trade unions try to resolve at a broader level, for all workers: 'this is a trade union question'.

Both negotiating the best possible 'deal' for workers and entering into dialogue with them represent two different ways that trade union officials try to address the reluctance of young workers to join trade unions as well as the problems that they face in the workplace. Others interlocutors deal with other dimensions of this reluctance, which they define both in terms of worker passivity or worker fear. However, the problem of recruiting and activating young members is not framed or explained only in ways that focus on the young workers themselves; this problem is often also placed in a broader context. For example, SP brings up another aspect of individualism issue, one that is linked to the rise of flexible employment in Slovenia and its effects both on young workers and on trade union organization. SP in this excerpt explains how the rise of short-term employment affects recruitment of young, entry-level workers in his factory:

> *The problem with young people is this: young people are being employed for the first time in these companies. Often this concerns short-term employment, while I would say that hardly have any long-term employment. We tell each person that this is their own decision, but that this can hurt more than benefit your career. We should be honest, membership in a trade union is not, I would say, an advantage for a long-term contract.* (SP)

In this passage, SP narrates a 'realistic' approach to member recruitment, advising entry-level workers to think and take into account the potential negative implications that membership can have for those on short-term contracts. Individualism here is framed in terms of strategic thinking about one's career due to the current state of the labour market – a reality that, according to SP, one should be 'honest' about with workers. Being 'honest', that is, speaking openly about the problems that young

workers face can also be considered to be an effective way to engage the issue of organization among young workers.

Our interlocutors mention at least two possible ways to address or improve the image that young workers have concerning trade unions or trade union activism. DS provides an example of the first arguing that people either are not interested or have an inaccurate opinion of trade unions because they do not really know what trade unions do and the efforts involved in maintaining certain worker rights:

Trade unions must exist. They have to exist, even I at the beginning thought that the trade unions did nothing. They do a great deal, and if we did not have them our salaries would be much smaller, but until you are involved and see how things actually operate, you do not know this. No one knows that for one cent upstairs, people almost come to blows. And we will have to go upstairs one hundred times. (DS)

DS explains how he did not really know much about trade unions and what they did until he became a part of them. One of the easiest arguments made against the trade unions – at least in the Slovenian case – is to say that trade unions do not do anything. Making the trade union and its activities more accessible, which can of course done in numerous ways, is one possible way to reframe the relationship between trade unions and workers. The second possibility is associated more with the systemic changes that will be set in motion in the labour market due to precarization:

… this path of trade unionism or of the workers council is problematic because it is bound to four year terms and of course if after a term I do not win, I can also wind up without a job … um … And for this reason people in Slovenia rarely decide in favour of this. Maybe things will change when employments become or have been becoming ever less secure, and workers of the younger generation will decide more easily for a professional position in the trade unions. However, on the other hand, our generation with great difficulty takes such a risk, not to have a permanent job is a little problematic. (SP)

In this passage SP associated flexibility not only as the employment norm for the young generation, but also to members of the young generation themselves. He posits them in opposition to workers from the older generation who are used to permanent employment and who are loathe to take on change or accept risks. Younger workers, who for SP are more acquainted with the reality of flexibilization, may evaluate what older workers view as 'risky' according to different criteria. It is to them that SP looks for change.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion of common discursive themes outlined employed by the chosen sample of representative Slovenian trade union officials that I have outlined barely scratches the surface of things; yet, an in-depth analysis of their organization discourse transcends the boundaries of this particular essay. However, I hope to have made the point that an analysis of organization discourse can represent a useful exercise in reflexivity understood as developing awareness of the terms trade union officials employ by themselves to make sense of, describe, evaluate, and critique issues or problems of organization. Breaking down narratives discursively involves identifying how people define, associate and distinquish terms and concepts, thus rendering explicit what is taken for granted and thus unexplored. In doing so one can identify significant commonalities and distinctions among Slovenian trade union officials, who, as all other social groups, are inherently heterogenous. Failing to do so hinders the identification of existing problems or discursively effective narrative resources.

Upon analyzing the patterns and clusters of themes with which my interlocutors have talked about organization, I have identified the issue of generational change and the distinction between young and old as especially significant. Not only is the issue of the young generation considered a challenge for trade union officials, but the narrative patterns seem to fall more along the lines of age than in terms of gender or of business sector (i.e. there being certain standpoints particular to the automotive or retail sector, in this particular case). In effect, the issue of age refers of a complex cluster of issues: First, the generational divide is cast in terms of a systemic issue, with the shift in generations mapping onto the transition from socialism and capitalism – which of course, has a number of implications, some of which are echoed even in the narrative segments included in this essay. Secondly, the issue of generations is cast as a demographic issue manifested in a decline in membership as older workers that automatically joined unions are being replaced by younger workers who do not have a tradition of trade union membership and thus do not automatically identify with trade unionism. Third, the issue of young vs. old is also understood as a generational divide between younger and older trade union officials as well as between younger and older workers, with two divisions not usually associated with the same sets of issues. Further discursive analysis could result in mapping out the way that each

generation of trade union officials understands the generational issue. Shedding light on the overlaps and disjunctures between these positions could represent a potentially fruitful reflexive moment for trade union officials, whose successful organization hinges on effectively addressing the issues significant to all generations of Slovene workers living in contemporary Slovenia.

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