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Leadership Discourse, Context and Storytelling – A Theoretical Approach

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Abstract: This article examines leadership discourse from an applied linguistic perspective, arguing that leadership is best understood as a dynamic, context-bound process enacted through communication rather than as a fixed personal attribute or hierarchical position. Drawing on discourse-analytic approaches such as conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics, it explores how leadership emerges collaboratively in interaction and is shaped by organizational, cultural, and technological contexts. Particular attention is given to storytelling as a strategic and constitutive practice through which leaders construct meaning, foster alignment and commitment, and shape organizational identity, demonstrating that language constitutes the primary medium through which leadership is accomplished and sustained.

Keywords: leadership, context, story, discourse, communication.

1. Introduction

Leadership has long been a central concern of management theory and practice, yet it remains an elusive and multifaceted concept. While traditional perspectives have often focused on leadership as a set of traits, a position of authority, or the actions of a particular individual, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized leadership as a communicative and discursive process. From the perspective of applied linguistics, leadership is not merely exercised through decisions and strategies but is enacted, negotiated, and sustained through language in interaction.

Every core leadership activity—envisioning goals, motivating others, organizing work, resolving conflicts, or implementing change—relies fundamentally on communication. Whether delivered in face-to-face meetings, digital exchanges,

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formal presentations, or informal conversations, leadership is performed through discourse shaped by professional, organizational, and socio-cultural contexts. Rather than being the isolated accomplishment of a single individual, leadership emerges dynamically in interaction, often distributed across team members and constructed turn by turn in collaborative processes. This shift from viewing leadership as an attribute of a person to understanding it as a process accomplished in and through discourse opens new avenues for linguistic inquiry.

This article explores leadership discourse from a contextualized and applied linguistic perspective. It first reviews major conceptualizations of leadership and the ways in which they inform linguistic research. It then examines contemporary approaches to leadership discourse, including distributed and emergent models, highlighting the central role of context, culture, and communication channels. Particular attention is given to discourse-analytic frameworks—such as conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics—that provide tools for examining how leadership is enacted in real-time interaction. Finally, the discussion turns to storytelling as an increasingly significant component of leadership discourse, illustrating how narrative functions not only as a persuasive managerial tool but also as a constitutive communicative practice that shapes organizational reality.

By integrating managerial and linguistic perspectives, this article argues that leadership discourse should be understood not simply as a means of transmitting information, but as a socially situated practice through which direction, alignment, and commitment are constructed. In doing so, it highlights the importance of context in shaping how leadership is performed, interpreted, and sustained across diverse professional settings.

2. Leadership discourse – approaches and contextualisation

There are numerous definitions about leadership. However, what we are concerned with is what leadership means from the point of view of applied linguistics and how leadership discourse should be dealt with. Bass (1981:71) asserted that there as many definitions of leadership as there are people who have attempted to define it. If we think about a leader's activities (envisioning goals, motivating others, making decisions, organizing etc.), it is obvious that all of them involve communication. We could say that communication has become the most important activity a leader performs on daily basis under the form of several other activities. The way leaders communicate in either oral or written/electronic form depends a lot on the professional context they operate in.

This is why leadership is not always the doing of only one individual, but rather a collaborative process which involves several people. It is this dynamic nature of leadership that makes it more useful to explore it in a particular context (where leadership takes place) rather than focussing exclusively on the person who is performing it. Clifton (2017:47) observed that even in a team "where there is a formal hierarchic superior acting as the chair, leadership is distributed across all the group and emerges from group interaction on a turn-by-turn basis as a decision is made". A leader

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is not “doing leadership” alone, consequently all the communication processes involved should be seen as continuous interaction and collaboration. Depending on the context and a wide range of factors, leadership communication may focus more on relational or transactional aspects. It is not necessarily linked to a person or a position, but “it is sometimes more productively conceptualised as a process or something that people – often collaboratively – accomplish.” (Schnurr, 2025:152)

2.1 Leadership definitions

In an attempt to conceptualize leadership definitions, Grint (2010) refers to four different views of leadership: leadership as a position, leadership as a person, leadership as a result and leadership as a process. In the first view, leadership takes place in positions of authority, power and influence and in order to understand how leadership works, one should focus on those in leadership positions. The second view argues that leadership is not tied to positions but rather to a specific person. These two views focus on individuals and understand leadership as an attribute, as something a person has. The other two views focus on leadership as something people do and acknowledge the collaborative and dynamic nature of leadership. (Schnurr, 2025:153)

When it comes to linguistic research, the studies based on the view that leadership is either a person or position explore more the language used by those in positions of authority or by those who are widely recognized as leaders in their field. It is an approach which has been criticized particularly by researchers who conceptualise leadership as the result of a process. Studies in this area focus on outcomes and achievements and acknowledge the crucial role of language and interaction as an important site where leadership takes place, moving towards a more context-based conceprtualisation of leadership from the point of view of applied linguistics.

Drath et al. (2008) conceptualise leadership as the creation of direction, alignment and commitment. Direction is understood as “widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims and mission,’ while alignment refers to “the organization and coordination of knowledge and work in a collective” and commitment means “the willingness of members of a collective to subsume their own interests and benefit within the collective interest and benefit” (Drath at al., 2008:636)

2.2 New approaches on leadership discourse

As a consequence of developing different conceptualisations, new approaches have emerged in the leadership discourse research which Stephanie Schnurr classified into: co-leadership, shared leadership, distributed leadership and emergent leadership (Schnurr, 2025:156). Co-leadership has been described as “two leaders in vertically contiguous positions who share the responsibilities of leadership” (Jackson & Perry, 2008:82). In shared leadership, leaders’ responsibilities are shared and rotated among team members. Distributed leadership refers to teams leading their work collectively and independently of formal leaders. These approaches have led to various linguistic analyses of conversations in professional situations, which show advantages and

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disadvantages of practising these ways of doing leadership and how they might be best suited to address the particular requirements of different workplaces, teams or projects.

In leadership communication, like in every other area of professional communication, context is essential. As Oc & Carpini (2023:360), noticed "Leadership occurs within a multilayered, multidimensional context.". Leadership communication is influenced by a variety of factors from more abstract ones up to specific situational factors and variables. In addition to these, from the perspective of applied lnguitics, it is crucial to to consider the role of workplace/organizational culture as well as the discursive norms that characterize a particular team (Schnurr, 2025). People who work together for a long time will develop a shared repertoire of behavioural and linguistic norms, norms which should be constantly reinforced by leaders through their performance in interactions with group members, being those formal or informal, during a chat, a Zoom meeting or via e-mail. Thus, the relationship between leaders and workplace culture is also multidimensional.

Moreover, the medium or channel through which leaders communicate has an important impact on leadership communication. Depending on whether instant messaging is used or face-to-face communication appears, a leader could place more emphasis on relational aspects or ensure that transactional goals are met. The specific norms which govern these channels are highly dependent on the company culture. E-mails can be more or less direct in different companies or the formality of meeting could vary.

Besides workplace culture, we should not forget about the impact of culture in general on leadership discourse and communication. The concept of leadership itself is an Anglophone management concept and most of the existing research has come from the Western context. So, would western conceptualisations of leadership apply to other cultural settings?. Research conducted between 1970-2000 claims that what is considered to be effective leadership may be linked to culture-specific values and can be explained by drawing on frameworks of cultural dimensions (Hofstede**,** 1980) More recent research shows, however, that a wide variety of different ways of doing leadership exist in any socio-cultural context (Schnurr, 2025:160). The same researcher argues that nowadays it is crucial to distance oneself from generalisations and stereotypes and acknowledge the wide variation of leadership behaviours which can be found within the same national culture. Guthey & Jackson (2011:175) propose that research needs "to conceive of both leadership and culture in the broad sense, and to look at how different types of leadership interact with culture in different ways".

2.3. Leadership discourse from a linguistic perspective

Considering all things mentioned so far, the next issue is how to best analyze leadership discourse from the perspective of applied linguistics. One approach is represented by the focus on language in what is called traditionally "discursive leadership". It is based on Fairhurst's research (2007) who considers that in order to analyse and understand leadership, we have to look at the language and at the processes through which leadership is enacted as an organisational practice. Research in the tradition of

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discursive leadership would draw on tools and methods developed by discourse analytic approaches in order to analyze leadership discourse as it takes place. Fairhurst (2007:6) makes a very interesting distinction between discourse (or "little d" discourse) and Discourse (or "big D" discourse). The first one refers to the study of talk and text in social practice whereas the second is heavily influenced by Foucault who viewed discourse as "practices that systematically form the objects of which we speak" (Foucault, 1972:49) "Little d" discourse can be analysed by using conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics, while Discourse is more analysed by critical and postmodern discourse analyses. Nevertheless, discursive leadership places communication at the heart of the leadership processes and sees it as the main means for accomplishing leadership in and through discourse. As Clifton(2006:293) puts it, discursive leadership offers "a better understanding of the every day practices of talk that constitute leadership and a deeper knowledge of how leaders use language to craft reality".

As mentioned above**,** conversation analysis is broadly used by discursive leadership researchers. It has been mainly used to study institutional talk in various contexts by analysing natural data, mostly talk and more recently, even non-verbal communication. Using conversation analysis for research purposes involves three stages of data recording, data transcription and data analysis. Conversation analysis focuses on the micro-level analysis of an interaction and not so much on the wider context. Thus, multimodal conversation analysis demonstrates how leadership is accomplished on the micro-level of an interaction. To quote Clifton (2006:210), "it is able to provide a description of the machinery for doing leadership".

Another approach used in leadership discourse analysis is interactional sociolinguistics, which combines the detailed analysis of the discourse with information about the context. It is also interested in how participants' relationships are built and negotiated in and through talk. According to Schiffrin, 1994:133, "speakers use language tp provide continual indices of who they are and what they want to communicate." This is why interactional sociolinguistics is particularly suited for research in leadership conceptualized as a position, co-leadership as well as distributed leadership. When analyzing leadership discourse through the interactional sociolinguistic approach, the focus is on how conversation is inferred and what cues the context offers. Thus, an interactional sociolinguistic analysis may involve, for example, identifying and describing ways in which people exercise power through language use, such as: interrupting others, summarising progress and discussions, controlling topics etc. Given the fact that interactional sociolinguistics puts an emphasis on context, it is very useful for analysing different ways of doing leadership in different contexts, by showing the relationship between leadership discourse and its specific context.

3. Leadership discourse and storytelling

In the vast area of leadership discourse, a relatively new field has been gaining ground: storytelling. Actually, it is considered that management is among the last of the

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disciplines to recognize the central significance of narrative to the issues that it deals with. Most of the human sciences have understood in the past couple of decades the centrality of narrative to human activities. However, storytelling does not replace analytical thinking; it supplements it by providing new perspectives and stimulating creativity and innovation. Storytelling is mainly a performance art whose basics can be mastered fast. Nevertheless, doing it on regular basis requires effort and practice.

3.1 The power of storytelling

Stories possess a remarkable power to captivate the human mind, triggering emotional reactions and enhancing our ability to remember information. Neuroscientific studies reveal that when we listen to a story, our brains do more than simply decode the words—they activate sensory regions as though we were living the events firsthand. This process, called "neural coupling," enables us to form rich mental images and build deeper emotional connections with the material.

Moreover, storytelling facilitates the development of rapport with audiences by creating shared experiences that promote trust and empathy. A further advantage of storytelling lies in its impact on message retention. Empirical studies indicate that information conveyed through narrative structures is retained up to twenty times more effectively than information presented in bullet-point format.

In addition, stories possess both cultural and universal relevance, enabling complex business concepts to be communicated in ways that are accessible and relatable across diverse cultural and demographic groups.

In conclusion, storytelling extends beyond a simple communicative technique; it represents a powerful strategic tool that transforms communication within business contexts. By engaging cognitive processes on multiple levels, fostering trust and empathy, enhancing information retention, and appealing to universal human experiences, storytelling has the capacity to elevate routine speeches and professional interactions into impactful experiences that motivate action and facilitate change.

3.2 Leaders and storytelling

So, what is a story? Is a story the same thing as a narrative? Many researchers treat the two terms as synonyms referring to "an account of events that are casually connected in some way." (Denning, 2011:35) Other practitioners view them as different terms referring to either a narrower or a broader sense, here again with different perceptions and not a generalized view on which is a better choice in a narrower and which one is a better choice in a broader sense. As Catherine Mary Bateson put it "Storytelling is fundamental to the human search for meaning." (quoted in Denning, 2011:42) However, does it make sense for business to use storytelling? Does it make sense for leaders to include storytelling in their discursive practices?

Generally, executives operate with a particular mindset which is based on analysis. However, analysis is not enough when it comes to motivating and inspiring people or directing them towards accepting and dealing with change. It is here that leaders need stories which will turn numbers into convincing pictures of future

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accomplishments. Stories are part of people's everyday life, whether they realize it or not. Corporate audiences need to be told stories which would resonate with their mindset and, at the same, would not consume their time and patience. Stories are meant for leaders to communicate their goals in a way which would be more inspiring to people than merely exposing the future benefits of accomplishing those goals. At this point, stories should be considered from two points of view: the leadership/managerial point of view and the discursive/linguistic point of view. Nevertheless, the leadership/managerial goals in storytelling can be fulfilled by using different linguistic/discursive techniques. A variety of narratives might actually accommodate a variety of aims.

For example, if you need to communicate the complex nature of a change and inspire the organization to embrace it, it is recommended to use what is called a "springboard story", which is based on a recent event, has a single protagonist with whom the audience can identify and it has a happy ending, showing that a change has been at least partly implemented in a successful way.

In order to gain people's trust, leaders need to make themselves known to the others; one of the best ways to do it is through a story which is usually based on a life event and refers to the speaker's experience. This should be a detailed story place in a particular context. An example in this area is Jack Welch, whose success with General Electric had a lot to do with his ability to tell his own story.

Stories are also about companies; they are a way in which companies communicate about themselves and about their products and reputation. Stories are used a lot in branding as well in transmitting values in the company and about the company.

Collaboration and team strength could also be encouraged by stories. People share personal experiences with their colleagues and in this way they get closer. When the leader himself/herself shares a personal story with the group, the level of trust will certainly increase. On the other hand, rumors might also take the form of stories and they can be a distraction managers have a hard time dealing with. One way of dealing with rumors is for leaders to come with another story to convince the listeners that the gossip is not true. Even satire and jokes can be used to fight with the power of rumors.

Another important area where stories help leaders is when they have to communicate the know-how across an organization. Knowledge-sharing narratives could be unusual and may occur a lot in informal settings. They may be more about problems and how to solve them rather than having a clear plot and a character. They will show the leader's vision about problem-solving as well as his perspective about the future.

3.3 Context-based approaches and application to business presentations

When it comes to leadership discourse, a very important thing to consider is the crucial function language plays as it serves as a constitutive force "that takes organisations into being" (Darics & Clifton, 2023:21) The point is people often see communication as a technical skill used to achieve a professional goal; achieving effective communication

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is a goal for organisations and employees and in this perception, language and communication are treated as mere means to achieve a goal. In this way, the crucial function of language mentioned above is overlooked. So, the question is: how should we approach leadership discourse and communication? As a means to achieve leadership functions or from the linguistic point of view?

From an instrumentalist perspective, linguistic skills in communication are considered to be part of a technical skills set. However, the view that language is an objective mirror of reality is not always true and may become a source of confusion. Language should be viewed as a dynamic and contextually-bound social practice that constructs reality through interactions (Darics & Clifton, 2023:22))

Hence, from, what connects the two approaches on leadership discourse is the context which is the core of both a leader's activities and interactions in general as well as of their linguistic and discursive practices. Cohen et al. (2005) and Musson et al.(2003) consider that management education that denies students discursive consciousness perpetuates the division between the two approaches, so management education should incorporate a deeper understanding of language in its curriculum as well as in organisational research.

One area in which the two approaches on leadership discourse combine very well and clearly complete each other on basis of context is when a leader delivers a presentation and uses storytelling to make it more effective both from the managerial and the linguistic point of view. The story in itself sets the context and integrates the presentation into the larger context of the corresponding activity (a presentation delivered to clients or a presentation delivered to the board or to the team etc.). This is why the story should be chosen very carefully as it should align with the business goals and capture the audience's attention. The story should convey the key message of the presentation, which, the speaker obviously identified beforehand. It could be a personal anecdote, a case study or a fictional scenario; nevertheless, it should relate and resonate with the audience's interests.

As in any other presentations, story-based presentations involve knowing the audience in advance and being familiar with the data one has to present in order to be able to answer questions. The narrative framework should be set in advance depending on whether the manager refers to a problem-solving situation, an evolution or just an illustration of a similar situation to the one the company is confronted with. Data integration into this narrative framework would mean actually transforming a factual report into an engaging and impactful narrative, presented in a cohesive and organized manner. As attention spans are short, communication should be clear and concise, so a well-organized presentation based on a data-containing story would be particularly helpful in business settings where data-driven decisions are crucial for success. By incorporating data in the story, the development of the narrative would be improved and the impact of the story will increase.

This is why setting the scene in business narratives is crucial, as providing a detailed context will help the audience relate the story to their experience. "Context setting can also help establish the credibility of the storyteller" (Ashworth, 2024: 24)

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This might be conveyed for example by referring to the company's history and their position on the market. Depending on the topic of the presentation, the objectives and the data to be inserted, the manager could choose a certain type of story and establish the context so as to capture the audience's attention and achieve their goals. Thus, the language the presenter will use would be contextually integrated and it would serve both purposes, i.e. perform a managerial function or achieve a managerial goal and become a communication means meant to enhance understanding and act as a constitutive force, not just to achieve objective, but to take organisations into being by creating trust, cohesion and building the organisational discourse.

4. Conclusion

This article has examined leadership discourse through the lens of applied linguistics, arguing that leadership is most productively understood not as a fixed attribute of an individual or a function of hierarchical position, but as a dynamic, context-bound process accomplished in and through communication. By moving beyond person-centred and position-based definitions, contemporary approaches conceptualise leadership as an interactional achievement—one that emerges collaboratively and is continuously negotiated in discourse.

Discourse-analytic approaches such as conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics provide valuable methodological tools for uncovering the micro-processes through which leadership is enacted. These approaches reveal how power, authority, collaboration, and relational work are negotiated turn by turn, and how contextual cues guide participants' interpretations of leadership actions. Importantly, they also show that leadership practices vary significantly across contexts, challenging essentialist or culturally deterministic views of what "effective" leadership should look like.

The article has also highlighted storytelling as a particularly powerful dimension of leadership discourse. Far from being a decorative rhetorical device, storytelling functions as a strategic and constitutive practice. Through narrative, leaders make sense of complex realities, translate abstract goals into meaningful visions, foster trust, and shape organizational identity. Stories help integrate data, values, and experience into coherent frameworks that resonate with audiences and motivate action. At the same time, storytelling illustrates the intersection between managerial objectives and linguistic practice: the effectiveness of a story depends not only on its strategic intent but also on its discursive construction and contextual appropriateness.

Ultimately, the relationship between leadership and discourse is reciprocal. Leadership relies on language to achieve managerial aims, yet language simultaneously shapes organizational realities by constructing shared meanings, identities, and norms. Recognizing this dual function calls for greater discursive awareness in both organizational research and management education. A deeper understanding of how leadership is performed through language can bridge the gap between instrumental communication skills and a more reflective, context-sensitive view of discourse as social practice.

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In conclusion, leadership discourse should be approached as a multilayered, contextually embedded phenomenon in which communication is not simply a tool of leadership but its very medium of existence. By integrating linguistic and managerial perspectives, researchers and practitioners alike can better understand how leadership is enacted, sustained, and transformed within contemporary organizations.

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