POLYSEMY AND REFLEXIVITY: REVISITING THE RESEARCH DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Although it has been the subject of a certain interest in social sciences, polysemy is often overlooked in management science, where research relies on positivist traditions. These traditions continue to influence researchers regardless of the epistemological and methodological approaches they follow; this in turn has an impact on the way they approach polysemic terms. However, more recently, some researchers have expressed interest in reflexive methods, derived mainly from sociology. Our objective is to revisit existing research designs, integrating a reflexive approach structured around eight topics of reflection, in order to explore the various aspects of polysemic terms which abound in management. By doing so, we bring three major contributions: presenting polysemy and underlining its omnipresence in management; identifying four research issues and a meta-issue related to polysemy in management; and adapting and operationalizing a reflexive research method with a view to addressing these issues.

Keywords: Research methods, reflexivity, polysemy

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Summary

Although it has been the subject of a certain interest in social sciences, polysemy is often overlooked in management science, where research relies on positivist traditions. These traditions continue to influence researchers regardless of the epistemological and methodological approaches they follow; this in turn has an impact on the way they approach polysemic terms. However, more recently, some researchers have expressed interest in reflexive methods, derived mainly from sociology. Our objective is to revisit existing research designs, integrating a reflexive approach structured around eight topics of reflection, in order to explore the various aspects of polysemic terms which abound in management. By doing so, we bring three major contributions: presenting polysemy and underlining its omnipresence in management; identifying four research issues and a meta-issue related to polysemy in management; and adapting and operationalizing a reflexive research method with a view to addressing these issues.

Keywords: Research methods, reflexivity, reflectivity, polysemy, management

POLYSEMY AND REFLEXIVITY: REVISITING THE RESEARCH DESIGN

1- INTRODUCTION

Polysemy is a phoneme for which there are several interrelated meanings (Taylor 2002). According to Pauly (2010), these different meanings result from the complexity of society and its activities. Today, in the context of societies made more complex by the development of information technology, polysemy is even considered to be immanent in most words in the English language (Taylor 2002). While several linguists have expressed interest in polysemy of terms as simple as verbs with a view to determining their identity and variation principles [see the work of Pauly (2010), McIntyre (2012) and Salazar and Verdaguer (2009)], polysemy also relates to nouns and adjectives, or even texts and stories stemming from phenomena whose scope can be wide for researchers from various disciplines.

Largely neglected in the past by social sciences, polysemy has begun to attract the attention of researchers. Indeed, research using the keyword ‘polysemy’ in databanks of scientific articles shows a growing interest for this phoneme. One may surmise that this increased interest is related to post-structuralism/postmodernism, where plurality, change and dissonance prevail (Agger 1991). For several researchers, it is obvious that the meaning of concepts forming research can vary. This said, many researchers view polyphony issues only in terms of the participants, seeing the interviews as a means of identifying the various meanings given to a concept and that are not obvious to a researcher from the outset. However, interviews, and whichever ways they are treated qualitatively, cannot meet alone all the challenges associated with polysemy in research. How can one study a concept whose meaning can vary in time and space, both in the scientific documentation, with the same researcher, between researchers of the same research team and at the participant level?

Harbour et Kisfalvi (2012) clearly demonstrated the importance of taking into consideration polysemy related to managerial courage and proposed a mixed method suited to its study. In this article, the authors concluded that the study of polysemic terms and related emotions constitutes a stimulating and novel challenge for the researchers that required innovative research methods. In a similar manner, we have explored the reflexive methods recently put forward or discussed by several researchers in administration (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009; Chia 1996; Cunliff 2003; Goldpink and Kay 2010; Hardy and Clegg 1997; Haynes 2011; Hibbert, Coupland and MacIntosh 2010; Mahadevan 2001; Munkejord 2009; Orr and Bennet 2009). Subsequently, we came to the conclusion that these methods can assist in meeting the challenges of studying polysemic terms, for which a short list was proposed in the preceding paragraph. Our objective is to demonstrate how reflexive methods can be an innovative way to improve research design with a view to taking into consideration and examining different aspects of these terms in management. To accomplish this, we will first provide a brief summary of the importance accorded to the polysemy of concepts in management. Second, we will examine how management research deals with polysemic concepts. Third, after briefly summarizing reflexive methods, we will propose an approach structured around eight topics of reflection stemming from the hermeneutic approach of Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), allowing for the integration of concept polysemy in the different ways that a researcher would normally look at the phenomena under study. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of limitations and contributions.

2- POLYSEMIC CONCEPTS IN MANAGEMENT

Polysemic concepts abound in management. Harbour and Kisvalvi (2012) listed six terms considered to have several meanings: courage; leadership; competence; strategy; practice (of the strategy); values and conflicts of interest. Other terms can be added to this list, such as the concepts ‘diversity’ (Benhamou 2004) and ‘incubator’ (Aernoudt 2004). To illustrate our point, we will focus on two terms in particular: leadership and courage.

Leadership is undeniably one of the concepts most studied in management. However, even though it has been examined under various perspectives and methodologies and that in recent years studies using qualitative methods have often given solid results, researchers remain divided as to the nature of leadership. We believe that one of the reasons for this division is that the majority of researchers are unaware of the polysemic character of the concept despite the work of McLaurin (2006), who stressed that there are virtually as many definitions of the term as there are people who try to define it. Already, in 1985, Bennis and Nanus (1985) listed over 300 definitions of the term leadership! For example, the term leadership can be used by researchers or by study participants to identify a high manager or an employee, but also to represent a social phenomenon or a skill (Bennis and Nanus 1985; Lapierre 2008). Moreover, the essence of leadership is studied under various aspects: intrinsic qualities, acquired attributes or psychological phenomenon, for example (McLaurin 2006). This effectively illustrates the difficulties associated with polysemic terms.

Courage is another example of a polysemic term in management that poses challenges in research, as highlighted by Harbour and Kisfalvi (2012). These authors listed several definitions of the term. Certain researchers define courage as being necessarily entrenched in a morally acceptable context (Peterson and Seligman 2004) whereas for others, courage is solely defined as being an ability to control fear (Rachman 1978). The variety of contexts associated with courage also represents a challenge for researchers. For example, studying managerial courage in the context of a financial institution and in a hospital implies nuances related to the impacts on the life and physical integrity of hospital customers. Despite these challenges, managerial courage and the leadership are terms largely used in management, in speeches or as management skills. However, their polysemic character is most often ignored both by practitioners and researchers.

Polysemy is complex and cannot be reduced to the number of explicit meanings of any given term. In addition to being different from one person to another, the meaning given to a term varies according to its context, but also varies in time. Consequently, how does traditional research take into account polysemy and which issues are raised for research projects based on polysemic terms?

3- Research in management and polysemic concepts

3.1- Portrait of traditional research

Strongly influenced by sociology, the research methods in management developed from positivist perspectives, to which they are still strongly attached today. For example, among the 26 articles published in Organizational Research Methods (ORM), 22 were of a positivist nature.

Positivist perspectives[1] are based on objectivist ontological premises. The existence of the phenomena is independent of individual consciousness, which is why focus is placed on researching regularities and causal systems (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Johnson and Duberley 2000). These premises led to nomothetic research approaches with well circumscribed and systematized techniques and protocols, copied from natural sciences models (Johnson and Duberley 2000).

In these approaches, terms (word) or concepts (general idea) are used to identify an objective phenomenon. Because objective phenomena can take various meanings, they are implicitly considered as being potentially polysemic. Consequently, the practice is for researchers to define them in an explicit and rigorous manner. In management, as in social sciences, the traditional method is that proposed by Lazarsfeld (1958), to operationalize a concept, a process composed of four major phases: 1. Visually representing the concept, 2. Specifying concept dimensions, 3. Choosing observable indicators for each dimension and, 4. Synthesizing the indicators into empirical indices. The operationalization proposed by Lazarsfeld remains topical. For example, in 2013, 4 of the 26 articles published in ORM were related to one of the aspects of concept operationalization (its definition, the quality of the developed indices, its empirical measurement, etc). For his part, Creswell (2009), in a work dedicated to the qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodological approaches, suggests retaining precise and operational definitions resulting only from the scientific literature, and not from spoken language, thus ensuring that terms are not 'invented' (p. 41). However, if these definitions do not exist, Creswell (2009) recommends retaining a definition that will be consistent throughout the research project.

Thanks to validity and reliability criteria for the empirical indices, it is possible to circumscribe the polysemic character of concepts. Indeed, validity refers to the principle that the empirical index provides an accurate measure solely of the concept, in terms of the monosemantic meaning defined for it (Cooper and Schindler 2011). Reliability relates to the exactitude and the precision of an index to measure a concept as determined (Cooper and Schindler 2011). In terms of polysemy, the validity and the reliability of empirical indices suggest that various meanings of the studied phenomenon could potentially be measured, other than the one specified by the researcher. The traditional procedures used to ensure validity (of contents, of construct, convergence/divergence, etc) and reliability (test-retest, Cronbach's alpha) are used to confirm, inter alia, the researcher's ability to control how polysemy affecting the concepts under study influences the results obtained. In our opinion, methods to ensure the validity and reliability of empirical indices only target simple polysemy.

It is important to underline that for the purposes of our analysis, we introduced a distinction between simple polysemy and complex polysemy. Simple polysemy refers to certain different and well circumscribed meanings that can be attributed to the concept. For example, we consider the word corporation to be a simple polysemic term: a corporation can refer to the legal structure of a company, to an association of professionals or to a group of merchants. A well built empirical index (valid and reliable) makes it possible to accurately distinguish meanings (a legal structure, an association of professionals or a group of merchants) according to the context of the word's use. Complex polysemy, by opposition, is associated with different meanings but that are more subtle and non-permanent. Courage is a perfect example of a concept showing complex polysemy: as a concept, it is often used to describe one's appreciation (after the fact) of a behaviour or a decision (Harbour and Kisfalvi 2013). In practice, this appreciation can be so subtle as to be difficult to circumscribe: the same behaviour can lead to recognition of various types of courage by different observers. Consider for a moment that courage is like an ability to control negative emotions (fear, sadness, etc). With this conception in mind, observe a manager who meets with employees to inform them that jobs will be cut following a company merger. For some, it is an act that requires managerial courage. For others, it is simply a question of a manager doing his/her job. For others still, it could even be qualified as a non-courageous decision, as being courageous would have implied going against the company's objectives in order to keep qualified workers, to maintain services for a given community or simply to be coherent with oneself values and beliefs.

With a complex polysemic term, ensuring validity and reliability of the empirical index becomes a true challenge. Take the example of Woodard (2001) who, in his research on hardiness and courage, retained a definition of courage that is based on the ability of an individual to control his/her fear. Thanks to measurements of internal consistency and other statistical analyses, he ensures the validity and reliability of measurement indicators of courage as defined. However, even if his indicators for courage are reliable and valid, he explains in the discussion of his study that he was not able to demonstrate the links between courage and the hardiness precisely because he had not retained the correct definition of courage: an existential definition would have been more appropriate. In our opinion, Woodard (2001) identified one of the pitfalls of his research as being simple polysemy; the appropriate definition is necessary, as are the valid and reliable measurement indicators to show the bond between courage and hardiness. However, later research (see Harbour and Kisfalvi (2012; 2013)) revealed that the polysemic complexity of the concept courage is much more than simple polysemy and that measuring validity and reliability is insufficient. Several of the leading topics in management (leadership, competence, etc) are complex polysemic terms and courage is no exception.

The latter example illustrates the weight of tradition on contemporary research in management. However, by opposing ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research, certain researchers think that they are shielding their qualitative approach from tradition and its positivist principles. On the contrary, Alvesson and Skolberg (2009) underline that several of these so-called ‘qualitative’ methods are based on systematized techniques and protocols that are actually copies of those described in quantitative research manuals. This pitfall becomes even more significant when the issues related to polysemic terms in research are taken into account.

3.2- Polysemic concepts and research issues

Among research issues related to polysemic terms, four are particularly noteworthy. To these, we add the meta-issue of impermanency. The first issue is that the majority of terms can be qualified as polysemic, including the term 'polysemy' itself! For example, Ceccarelli (1998) points out that researchers in rhetoric give a different meaning to the term polysemy than that used by researchers in linguistics: the former consider it in the context of a text, the latter with respect to a word[2]. However, these two uses of the term polysemy prove to be relevant in management sciences. Moreover, we explained earlier that in our opinion polysemic terms can be simple or complex and that polysemy is inherent in language. But why does polysemy exist? The reason is that polysemy is necessary to organized life. Thanks to polysemic terms, the interactions between the individuals can be more easily modulated within a linguistic choreography (Riggs 1987). In fact, Riggs (1987) stresses that the tolerance for ambiguity, which stems from the frequent use of polysemic terms, is intrinsic in social interaction and in particular makes it possible to deal with delicate situations.

The modulations applied to the word 'competence', for example, make it possible to use it in a variety of situations and with different meanings, even very subtle ones. For example, a manager can tell his employee that he has "certain competences". Depending on nonverbal language and the intonation used, as well as the past and current experiences of the employee and his emotional state, the manager will have a certain understanding of his message whereas the employee may interpret it 'correctly' or differently. Moreover, the interpretation could be different for another employee or even for the same employee in a different context. Polysemic terms thus make it possible to produce a nuanced message which requires an interpretation, which is exactly what makes hermeneutics interesting! Researchers must thus be sensitive to the polysemy of terms, know how to recognize them and remain open and critical in this respect.

The second issue retained is that the study of polysemic concepts requires, on the one hand, taking into account the general meaning of a term, at its highest level of abstraction, and, on the other hand, considering all of its possible uses according to the context (Taylor 2002). For example, the term strategy at its highest level of abstraction could be defined as the art of combining or coordinating means and ends. This definition summarizes all of the definitions presented in various general dictionaries (Larousse 2013; Merriam-Webster 2013; Oxford_Dictionaries 2013) and also the definition usually used in a corporate setting, according to Porter (1980). However, the term strategy can also take three meanings in a research context, as underlined by Johnson, Whittington, Sholes and Fréry (1998) in a handbook for administration students. Strategy can refer to contingency (as in a positioning on an industrial market), to strategic development orientations (as in differentiation strategy), or be presented like a process (as in strategic planning or daily practice). In the same way, the term strategy in the context of finance, marketing or human resources refers to completely different concepts. Then there are the various meanings associated with strategy in various academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology and medicine, to name only a few. Thus, for the researcher, the difficulty lies in simultaneously considering these two levels of abstraction to be sure to grasp the adequate meaning, which, according to Taylor (2002) proves to be impossible in many cases. It can be difficult to identify all contextual meanings of a term. The term strategy is a perfect example.

A third issue for researchers looking at polysemic terms in management is that the meaning of a term can emerge directly from a particular experience (Taylor 2002). This is an extension of an already acquired meaning. This conception of a polysemic term is linked to cognitivist approaches, which postulate that the emerging meanings of a polysemic term form a cognitive network for an individual (Kishner and Gibbs JR. 1996). This cognitive network can take form and grow throughout the experience. The researcher must thus be conscious that he himself and/or the study participant can 'build' a new meaning according to the context of the study in question.

The last issue we wish to underline here relates to the role of emotions in the choice of a semantic term. The literature in semantics and linguistics is curiously quiet as to the place of emotions in the recognition and the use of polysemic terms. However, Harbour and Kisfalvi (2013), in their study on managerial courage, described two types of courage. The first (courage to act) consists of the courage usually expected from senior managers and the second (courage to be) is a rarer but more intense type of courage. These two types of courage were recognized in the interplay of the intensity of emotions and their control, as perceived by the participants in the study. For example, the research participants recognized 'courage to act' when a high manager expressed emotions of stress or fear but in a relatively controlled manner. 'Courage to be' was recognized when the participants judged that the senior manager lived very intense negative emotions and that it was more difficult to establish and maintain control over emotions. In the same way, a lack of courage was recognized during critical moments when the high manager experienced very intense negative emotions that he could not control. These results suppose that the use and the recognition of the polysemic terms are influenced by emotions, both those of the observed and those of the observers. A solid grasp of emotional reality thus seems to be a necessary ally in studying polysemic terms.

We have identified four research issues related to polysemic terms: recognition of polysemy, determination of general versus contextualized meanings, the emergence of meanings and finally the impact of emotions on the meaning given to polysemic terms. Although these issues may at first seem simple, their interaction generates what we will call a meta-issue: impermanency. Researchers are thus confronted by a double level of analysis for polysemy that has to be taken into account when devising a research design, because the meaning given to a polysemic term can evolve through time, both for the study participants and for the researcher.

While rejecting Lazarfeld's 'positive' approach, certain researchers using qualitative approaches claim that there is nothing in polysemy that the researcher cannot take into account in a (well constructed!) interview. An interview is a means and not an end in of itself, and must be combined with other reflective steps that integrate the construction the meaning given by the researcher. If not, research remains at a level of 'trivial constructivism'. "Trivial constructivism manifests itself in professionals [researcher] who treat the knowledge of others as subjective construction and never doubt the 'objectivity' of their own" (Von Glasersfeld 1991, p.5, with our note between hooks). As Alvesson and Kärreman (2001, p.25) indicate, "Constructions need to be taken seriously in a variety of respects – not only how natives construct, but also how researchers construct their constructions."

These four research issues related to polysemic terms could leave a researcher feeling helpless and encourage him either to ignore polysemy, limit his analysis to simple polysemy or, even worse, abandon empirical research entirely! We believe, however, that the researcher can use these issues and the meta-issue to his advantage, in a creative way, in his interactions with the empirical material and in the interpretations he makes of that material, to develop theories that are more pragmatic and more firmly based on the construction of social life. In this respect, using reflexive methods in research constitutes an interesting path.

4- Reflexive research methods: Audacity and innovation in management

4.1- Reflexivity: Evolving methods

Researchers using a critical approach, particularly those looking at the interactions and influences between the researcher and the study participants, have integrated reflexivity in their research methods (Alkon 2011; Cunliff 2003). As such, reflexive methods are not new. They are already a part of the academic literature in philosophy, linguistics, natural sciences, anthropology, sociology and psychology, as noted by Cunliff (2003). However, it was only recently that reflexive methods attracted the attention of the researchers in management[3] (Alvesson, Hardy and Harley 2008; Cunliff 2003).

This interest in reflexive methods is particularly present in theories of organizations and in management. As Daft and Lewin (1990) point out, organizations are complex entities resulting from the interactions and emotions of the people who form them. In this way, at the beginning of the 1990s, in an editorial of the journal *Organization Science*, Daft and Lewin (1990) suggested developing methods, even 'heretical' ones that are able to encompass the diversity of the organizational life and the changes inherent therein. This paved the way for the emerging interest in reflexive methods. Nevertheless, it was not until the end of the 1990s and especially in the period 2000 - present that researchers in management began to publish scientific articles on reflexive methods.

Despite recent publications on the subject, defining reflexive methods remains a major issue. Indeed, many researchers agree that there is a lack of consensus on what these methods are (Cunliff 2003; Munkejord 2009; Orr and Bennet 2009). For example, this difficulty is quite apparent in the use of the terms 'reflexivity' vs 'reflection'. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009, p.8) mention that "…the intention of this book is to contribute to what we call 'reflective or reflexive empirical research' …for the time being we will use both these concepts synonymously. […] Later, we will distinguish between them, viewing reflexive as a particular, specified version of reflective research, involving reflection on several levels or directed at several themes. ... in the literature there are different uses of reflexivity or reflexion..." Another example illustrating the lack of consensus is the distinction proposed by Cunliff and Jun (2005) who proposes definitions of these terms that are quite different from those of Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009). For Cunliff and Jun (2005), reflection stems from calculating thought or "…reflecting on a situation to understand what is really going on and to develop theories to explain that reality…" (p.227) and reflexivity from meditative thought or "... understanding the grounds of our thinking by opening ourselves to the hidden nature of truth..." (p.227)

In any case, the general meaning of the term could be: reflexivity is a conscious exercise that is essential in understanding a subject under study (Alvesson 2003; Cunliff 2003). This exercise can either include or exclude the way in which a researcher builds his knowledge of the subject (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009; Hibbert, Coupland and MacIntosh 2010). Indeed, Cunliff (2003; 2009) and Cunliff and Jun (2005) distinguish two orders of reflexivity. The first order of reflexivity refers to an objectively structured study approach of a social phenomenon. The researcher examines how the actors, through their actions, the words they use (language), the knowledge they share, etc., take part in the construction of the social phenomenon under examination. The researcher excludes himself as an actor involved in the social phenomenon under study. The researcher bases his interpretation of the construction dynamics of the studied phenomenon and self-criticism of both his research and the subsequent communication of its results on an 'objectively' structured grid. The second order of reflexivity, namely radical reflexivity, focuses on the singularity of the researcher (knowledge, experiences, skills, emotions, etc.), from which hypotheses on the studied phenomenon are established. The intersubjectivity characterizing the knowledge development process is also a focal point of the second order of reflexivity: as he is interacting with the subjects of his research, the researcher is also taking part in the construction of the phenomenon under study and, at the same time, building knowledge of the phenomenon. This distinction between reflexivity of the first order and reflexivity of the second order is reminiscent of the difference made by Von Glasersfeld (1991) between trivial constructivism and radical constructivism. Lastly, the language practices and indexicality of the meaning of things are also the subject of second-order reflexive analysis.

Within the framework of our article, we chose to follow the approach proposed by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) because it covers the wide range of conceptions we identified in the scientific literature. The literature distinguishes four degrees of interpretation of a phenomenon that, through advanced principles, we associate with reflexivity of the first order: construction of the empirical material, interpretation, critical interpretation and self-criticism. The first level of interpretation relates to interpretation made while the researcher interacts with the empirical material, whereas the second level of interpretation relates to the underlying meaning of the data. A critical interpretation of the data (the third level of interpretation) consists of examining the empirical material from various angles, namely ideology, exerted power and domination, and the reproduction of particular social forms. Finally, the last level of interpretation targets scientific production as such (production of texts and use of language). Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) stress that by opposing the results of the four levels of interpretation, four degrees of reflectivity are produced, which we associate with reflexivity of the second order. Thus the result stemming from the four levels of interpretation is composed, among others, of the researcher (his experiences, knowledge, emotions caused by the research), of the intersubjectivity researcher/participant and of the contextualized character of the meaning given to things. By combining the four levels of interpretation (reflexivity of first order) and the four degrees of reflectivity (reflexivity of second order), a quadruple hermeneutics is formed. A clarification is needed here. When we use the words refleXivity or refleXive, we refer to a general term including first and second order refleXivity, under which there are interpretation and refleCTives activities. Then, when using the word 'interpretation', we are specifically talking about the activities related to the first order of refleXivity. For the words refleCTivity, refleCTive or refleCTions, all written with a 'CT' instead of an 'X', we refer to activities related to the second order of refleXivity (see figure 1). However, to be consistent, we have changed the name of the last level of interpretation of Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), who identified it as 'Reflection on oneself and linguistic reflection', to 'Interpretations on oneself and linguistic context' (IOLC).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

If reflexive methods are so popular in management, it is primarily because they allow for the construction and deconstruction of the data collected by the researcher (Alkon 2011). For example, reflexive methods favour both the comprehension of the way in which the researcher builds his data and his interpretations of the data. Moreover, by deconstructing his interpretations through questioning their basis and thus exposing their hidden side (influences, dominations, power, emotions, etc), the researcher gains a better understanding of the subject under study (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009). In this way, reflexive methods stimulate creativity (Alvesson 2003) and pave the way to exploring different methodologies (Cunliff 2003).

4.2- Reflexive methods and polysemic concepts

While polysemic terms are often used in everyday language, they remain complex to analyze and thus complicate research. Earlier, we pointed out four management research issues linked to polysemic concepts: recognition of polysemy, general versus contextualized meanings, the emergence of meanings and finally the impact of emotions on the meaning given to polysemic terms. We also identified a meta-issue, that is to say the impermanency of the meaning given to a polysemic term. We believe that reflexive methods can help to shed light on these issues and the meta-issue through the use of eight topics of reflection (see Figure 1) stemming from radical reflexivity; these topics are located at the interface of the various degrees of interpretation (identified by 4 circles on Figure 2) proposed by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

4.2.1- Reflections concerning the construct of the empirical material and its interpretation

Studying a polysemic subject requires sensitivity and a critical view that are able to question the meaning given to terms both by researchers and by participants in a study. Undertaking research on a polysemic term implies that the researcher accepts that he himself, or herself, has a certain conception of the term that may be different from the conception held by other researchers or the participants in the study. We propose four topics of reflection here (T1, T2, T3 and T4), corresponding to the first degree of reflectivity (Circle 1 on Figure 1).

Initially, the researcher must be aware of the various terms he uses and must define them. Some might respond – quite rightly – that this is exactly what researchers already do, particularly those who adopt a hypothetical-deductive approach. The research issue here goes beyond a simple definition because the empirical material comes mainly from a construction used during the research process. Consequently, the first topic of reflection (T1) aims at recognizing that the term that has just been defined is malleable and can be interpreted and used in different ways. Moreover, certain terms are frequently used in particular ways by the members of a given social group. Courage, used in various speeches and various types of literature, is one of these terms. It takes on a common meaning that can be influenced by academic anchoring: the meaning differs according to psychologists or philosophers, for example (Harbour and Kisfalvi 2013). In competence management, an area dominated by industrial psychologists, this results in courage being recognized as a management competence characterized by the psychological ability to make difficult decisions. For the different meanings given to the term ‘courage’, see Harbour and Kisfalvi (2012). However, the common meaning given to the term is largely influenced by ancient philosophers, for whom courage has a moral connotation (Hannah, Avolio and May 2011); an individual having committed a murder would seldom be recognized as being courageous.

Reflecting on the meaning given to the term implies, first, looking introspectively at one’s own conceptions of the subject under study. The researcher then has a second topic for reflection (T2): the theoretical concepts of the study subject and the way in which a term is used in everyday language. It is important to stress that for the researcher focussing on the polysemy touching the central terms of his research, reflecting on the use of the term in everyday language continues indefinitely. The interesting point is, on the one hand, to see how the term is used in a series of contexts, and on the other hand, to grasp any variations in its use.

In this respect, emotions are another topic of reflection (T3) for the researcher. Recognizing a participant’s emotions and their impact can be an interesting subject of reflection for the researcher. We remarked that the emotional environment influences the meaning given to a polysemic concept. It can thus be said that the emotional environment contributes to the contextualized meaning and, further, to judgement as a whole, as showed by Harbour and Kisfalvi (2013). Emotional reflectivity has already been discussed. For Munknejord (2009), emotional reflectivity, or emotional reflexivity as he called it, includes the recognition of emotions, empathic comprehension and the decisions in the decision-making process (Munkejord 2009). However, reflecting on emotions can prove to be complex. Indeed, there are perceived emotions and felt emotions. Moreover, emotions are ‘contagious’; they can influence the emotionally state of people in the immediate environment (Pugh 2002). Despite these difficulties, in our opinion this reflection is an essential step within the framework of studies on polysemic terms. Emotional context, i.e. the emotions as such, the strategies used to regulate them and the influences of emotions on the emotions of others, are all elements contributing to the contextualized meaning, albeit an emerging meaning, of a polysemic term, and to the interpretation made of the empirical material. There is a lot to reflect upon when emotional context is regarded as one of the sources of interpretation of the empirical material and the construction of the data, especially considering that emotional reality is continuously changing.

Apart from topics of reflection which call upon the observation skills and a certain introspection on the part of the researcher, reflection can continue on a fourth topic (T4), one more theoretical. As Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) propose, taking into account various theories allows one to view concepts and phenomena under a different light, which is of particular interest when reflecting on polysemic terms. Moreover, reflection can be stimulated by exploring the findings from various anchor disciplines. Indeed, a vertical integration across disciplines on a given subject of study makes it possible to see shared and un-shared significances, thus adding to the researcher's creativity.

The reflection topics listed above allow the researcher to address research issues related to a polysemic term because they are part of an interactive approach with empirical material (data construction) and with data interpretation, i.e. the first degree of reflectivity suggested by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009). These authors recommend data be treated in a pluralistic way, i.e. by considering several facets of the subject under study and by using a series of interpretations composed of various theories that are more or less related; in our view, this is a pertinent approach.

4.2.2- Critical reflections

Taking into consideration the impermanency associated with polysemic terms and their contextual character, we feel that it is very important to critically reflect on the understanding of empirical material. We believe that the topics of reflection that we propose will enable a researcher to go beyond a first degree of comprehension and interpretation, thus favouring the perception of different aspects of the concept under study and stimulating creativity in theorizing the polysemic term. We identified two topic of critical reflection (T5 and T6) that are associated with the second degree of reflectivity (Circle 2, Figure 1).

The first critical reflection topic (T5) involves confronting the interpretation of the data resulting from the interaction with the empirical material at the study participant level. In this context, we propose a reflection based on feedback shared between the researcher and study participant. Through a focus group and/or individual interviews, participants can intervene and criticize the researcher's interpretation of material provided him by the study participant. These methods, which are not new in and of themselves, also enable a researcher to perform a critical (and shared) evaluation of his interpretation of the context and its impact on the meanings given to polysemic terms under study. Alvesson (2003) suggested that interviews be considered as a means of exploring major issues that are outside the interior reality of the participants being questioned, and beyond social realities inherent in the data. By means of eight metaphors, Alvesson (2003) proposes a criticism and a new way of conceiving interviews, notably allowing for better reporting of complex phenomena using language. For example, by designing the interview like an arena for a construction project (metaphor 7), Alvesson (2003) proposed that the nature of the language and its use be mobilized to understand how the person interviewed builds his response in order to persuade, request or accuse, depending on the context. Alvesson (2011) views the remarks of the person interviewed as if they were a linguistic work of art.

Reflective work on the underlying meanings of polysemic terms must allow researchers to determine the conditions leading to a particular (contextualized) meaning. Allowing study participants to have a say on interpretative work can be disturbing for the researcher. The supposition is that the researcher does not take ownership of the data but rather that he/she receives data in the name of the study participant, who holds the key – or one of the keys – to understanding the subject under study. Such a shared reflection supposes, however, modesty on the part of the researcher. As Hardy and Clegg (1997) underline it, the diversity and the ambiguity of meanings are better understood when the researcher engages in a reflexive process characterized by dialogue and debate. The richness of the resulting interpretations should thus encourage the researcher to take some risks in this respect.

A second critical topic of reflection (T6) on the interpretation made from interaction with empirical material concerns the use of a more theoretical, or more 'rational' analysis, as proposed by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), i.e. confronting various theoretical approaches or critical perspectives (feminism, Marxism, etc). This method is different from that discussed in the previous section, which aimed at pointing out the various abstract meanings that a term takes on in various disciplines. Here, reflectivity focuses on the weight of ideologies, power, social inequalities, etc. on the meaning attributed to a polysemic term.

We have seen that polysemy is inherent in language. It thus makes it possible for individuals to interact in what we could describe as discursive choreography, i.e. modulating conversations through adaptation. An intentional and maintained vagueness allows for a flexibility that supports the interactions between individuals. This characteristic constitutes, in our opinion, an interesting perspective on the use of polysemic terms for ideological, power or even social reproduction reasons. To our knowledge, no research has been conducted on courage in a context of power. In the armed forces, for example, soldiers' courage is a concept that is highly valued (Miller 2000; Rachman 1978). The valorization of courage thus becomes a tool for mobilizing and motivating, even indoctrinating, allowing individuals to carry out tasks considered to be very difficult or even impossible. However, we have no knowledge of research on how courage is managed by the officers. Likewise, once again to the best of our knowledge, no studies have been undertaken on this subject in management. Confronting the interpretation of field data with critical theories could undoubtedly provide an interesting and pertinent opinion on the polysemic subject of study.

These last two topics of critical reflection concerning the interpretation of data – regardless of whether it is divided or collected in a 'rational' or theoretical way – resulting from empirical material, are situated at the second degree of reflectivity; Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) propose at this stage to question the interpretation (or interpretations) from the field by adopting critical perspectives. The objective remains the same: to promote the acquisition of a broad range of interpretation that can contribute to the researcher's creativity.

4.2.3- The 'self-reflectivity of the researcher'

The last two reflective topics (T7 and T8) that we propose focus on the researcher's introspection during interpretation and critical interpretation, that is to say the degree of reflectivity 3 and 4 (circles 3 and 4 in Figure 1). The first of these reflections (T7) involves thinking about one's ontological assumptions. We have seen that polysemy is regarded as being inherent in language in general. In this way, it takes on a particular importance in management research given the communications aspects associated with this profession. Recognizing polysemy is thus the first research issue that we identified. In our opinion, such recognition implies reflecting on one's ontological assumptions but also on those of the major researchers who have published on polysemic study. Although any researcher in management must start with such a reflection, we believe that it is particularly important for research frameworks dealing with complex polysemic terms. In management science, and in social science in general, major paradigms clash (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Each of these paradigms is built from a particular ontological base. By following a particular paradigm, researchers adopt the ontological position on which the paradigm is based (Gauthier and Ika 2012). Thus certain researchers study a reality which exists; the data reflect this reality and the analysis is factual. Other researchers study a constructed reality; the data reflect this construct formed of social actors, study participants and the researcher, and as such they are subjected to interpretative analysis. These two major ontological ideal-types are important in the study of polysemic terms and in addressing related research issues.

An ontological reflection on polysemic terms is all the more interesting because it refers to a particular design of reality, given the link between polysemy and the impermanency issue that we identified earlier. We have seen that polysemic terms are tools that allow for certain flexibility in the relations between individuals. However, this flexibility also applies to one individual. For example, polysemic terms allow ideas to be constructed in a flexible way; the ideas can also evolve without creating cognitive dissonance, or at least limit this dissonance. Polysemy thus brings about a certain ontological opening through the construction of ideas and their inherent interactions. Ontological reflection on the meaning of terms must, however, take into account that some terms are monosemantic whereas others are polysemic, but of a different nature (simple or complex).

In concrete terms, this reflection can take various forms. The first means could be simply thinking of the various designs taken for granted in management. Indeed, Gauthier and Ika (2012) show that the various conceptions or definitions of a project (another polysemic term in management) are in fact projections of various ontological postulates. Thus the researcher does not have to spend time identifying each ontological base associated with a conception of the polysemic terms at the heart of his research. Rather, he or she can simply take a position on the various concepts and consequently initiate reflection on ontological assumptions. Then, the researcher who wants to continue this reflection can begin a log book, noting assumptions and how the empirical material, interpretations and critical interpretations can reinforce or weaken these assumptions. The first means can lead to an exchange with other researchers through publications; the two means presented here are developed separately. The researcher can continue his/her reflexive approach by discussing ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches with other researchers, in conferences, congress or seminars, thus confronting his/her assumptions and the reflections emerging from the research process in which the researcher is implicated.

A second topic of reflection (T8) associated with assumptions is reflection on oneself. Here, the researcher looks at his emotions, values, fundamental beliefs and the authority with which he practices his profession. These are reflections on oneself both as a researcher and as an individual, such as a member of society, a group or sub-group; in each case, a comparison is made with the polysemic term under study. At the first degree of reflectivity, if the emotional context of the study participants is taken into consideration, a critical reflection on oneself requires that the researcher consider his own emotions – both perceived and experienced – throughout the research. The researcher must also reflect on the impact of his past, present and even expected experiences in terms of his comprehension of the subject of polysemic study. Moreover, as indicated by Cunliff, Luhman, and Boje (2004), the reflexive researcher should critically analyze the relationships between the concepts of time, life experiences and research, both for himself and for the study participant.

A trend in reflexive method practices promotes methods of introspection on the part of a researcher (Chang 2008; Ellis 2004; Haynes 2011). In this way, autoethnography is a recognized practice. Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as the process of writing about oneself in relation to culture. It is an exercise in theorization proceeding from an analysis of oneself. In this way, autoethnography is a reflective practice that can be particularly interesting when the role of emotions (those of the researcher and those of the study participant) is important in the comprehension of the study subject, as is the case for polysemic terms. It should, however, be stressed that autoethnography is also criticized or proposed with prudence (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009; Weick 1999). As Tomkins and Eatough (2010) indicate, the researcher runs the risk of becoming narcissistic. Theorization can thus take on a marginal importance. However, within a global reflexivity approach, autoethnography can prove to be an interesting tool.

The research issues that we have identified relative to polysemic study subjects imply that the researcher must use innovative methods to maintain awareness of the impermanency of meanings given to a subject, both by the researcher himself and by study participants. Management science has not been loquacious in recognizing polysemy and consequently in the methods used to study the phenomenon. In this way, the reflective topics we propose can be regarded as exploratory and aimed at addressing the complexity of the polysemic terms.

5- CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATION

Polysemy is central to language, communications and interpersonal relations. In this respect, it constitutes an interesting paradox: in everyday language, individuals are generally unaware of the polysemic character of the terms they use and easily deal with the multiple aspects of a term. This same reality constitutes, however, a major difficulty for researchers, for whom it becomes a research issue. Not only do individuals lack knowledge on polysemy;

researchers, at least those who work in management, are often unaware of polysemy and the research issues arising from it.

We wrote this paper in response to this observation, presenting three contributions to the methods of management research. Our first contribution is to present a portrait of polysemy and its ubiquitous presence in management. We believe that it is important that polysemy be recognized and understood. However, we noted that even publications on research methods do not cover this reality. The second contribution was to underline research issues associated with polysemy. We identified four issues and one meta-issue. In our opinion, the meta-issue of impermanency constitutes the most important challenge for the researcher. Under the influence of context, the emergence of meanings and the role of emotions, the meaning given to polysemic terms varies over time. However, researchers rarely analyze or reflect upon the concept of time. Moreover, this impermanency affects study participants as much as researchers. Finally, our last contribution is to operationalize the reflexive method as suggested by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), articulating it around eight reflection topics focussing on the polysemic subject under study, with a view to enriching existing research designs. This contribution is all the more interesting in that existing scientific literature on research methods remains relatively theoretical and proposes few practical tools to carry out this reflexivity. In fact, we believe that we are contributing to the scientific discussion both on reflexive methods and on polysemic terms.

The exploratory nature of this research is clearly a limitation. The three contributions, which add to the discussion, remain to some extent theoretical and have not yet been put into practice. This article constitutes the first stage towards the realization of an empirical research project on a polysemic study subject. It can also be regarded as a first step towards productive reflection and exchange on polysemy in the scientific literature in management.

6- Conclusion

Changing publications in the scientific literature in management shows us that the polysemy and reflexive methods are two disciplines that play an important part in management science: polysemy because it is inherent in language and thus central to all human activities and reflexive methods because they encourage the researcher to leave his zone of comfort and to face new horizons. However, in our opinion the two disciplines are closely related. Indeed, the study of a polysemic research subject requires reflection at several degrees to understand its evolution whereas reflexive methods should include reflection on the polysemic or monosemantic character of the subject under study or the concepts associated with it. In fact, we believe that polysemy and reflexive methods should be recognized and discussed in graduate studies focussing on research methods.

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