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# Professional discourses and resistance to change

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate how resistance to change might be a consequence of differences in professional discourse of professional groups working together in a change program.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper uses discourse analysis and rubrics to study the implementation of a new ICT system for an airline. Data for this case study were collected in semi-structured interviews, desk research, participant observations and a diagnostic workshop.

**Findings** – The data suggest that the non-aligned interaction between different professional discourses can be a source of resistance to change, in addition to other well-known sources of resistance to change in the change management literature. Future research regarding change management should incorporate linguistics and discourse analysis. Investigating resistance to change could be done comprehensively, paying attention to differences in professional cultures in cross-functional (project) teams. A managerial implication of the study is that making differences in professional discourses explicit is a constant point of attention in (project) teams.

**Research limitations/implications** – The authors' choices with regard to the sample size and methods limit the generalisability of the results. However, these choices were instrumental in reaching a rich set of data, which enabled the authors to get an understanding of the conversational dynamics in the case.

**Originality/value** – The paper argues that change programs contain subjective, informal and linguistic dimensions which might give reasons for understanding resistance to change in new ways. The theoretical contribution of the paper is that it integrates change management literature with linguistic literature about professional discourse.

**Keywords** Discourse, Resistance to change, Organizational change, Professional groups, Linguistics, Attitudes

**Paper type** Case study



## Introduction

Organisations change and adapt continuously to remain competitive (Balogun and Hope Hailey, 2008), and yet effective organisational change seems to be rare (By, 2005; Meaney and Pung, 2008). Recent statistics reveal that only one-third of organisational change efforts were considered successful by their leaders (Meaney and Pung, 2008; Beer and Nohria, 2000). Apparently, implementing successful change programs in organisations is quite problematic. The low success rates of change programs are often

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attributed to resistance to change on the part of employees (Ford *et al.*, 2008). However, a more nuanced view on resistance to change and its determinants might be more appropriate (Piderit, 2000).

Change processes are driven by several strategic considerations (Schilling and Steensma, 2001), including the need for more integrated ways of working (Rugman and Hodgetts, 2001) and the need to improve business performance (Balogun and Hope Hailey, 2008). These considerations typically result in structured change programs based on the assumption that change management consists of a (limited) set of interventions, which are regarded as objective, measurable and linearly manageable programs that can be realised in a relatively short time. However, scholars on resistance to change point out the need for research beyond top-down organisational change. Studies should pay attention to the dynamics of change processes (Jones *et al.*, 2004; Dibella, 2007) and thereby contribute to the understanding of resistance, which is paramount to the high failure rate of change programs (Quinn and Dutton, 2005; Di Virgilio and Ludema, 2009).

Influenced by the previous literature, we analyse change program dynamics. We approach change processes from a discourse perspective and argue that every change program contains subjective dimensions involving informal sensemaking interactions (Ford *et al.*, 2008). The way in which people interpret a change project is reflected in the language they use, hence, in their discourses (Barrett *et al.*, 1995; Boje, 1991; Di Virgilio and Ludema, 2009; Garzone and Archibald, 2010). When different professional groups that cooperate in a change program give different meanings to the change situation, these differences can result in resistance to change of those involved. Impaired mutual understanding can lead to negative affections towards members of other professional cultures, resulting in decreasing motivation to cooperate. Hence, we argue that the way people make sense of the change program has important implications for the effectiveness of change programs (Weick, 1995; Homan, 2010), and problems in change programs can be attributed to subjective sensemaking dynamics (Ford *et al.*, 2008; Ford and Ford, 2010).

The objective of this paper is to shed light on the way language use among participants in change programs affects resistance to change. We draw from two literatures, namely change management literature about sense-making processes and linguistic literature about professional discourses and the role of language in interaction between different professional cultures. Our study's contribution lies in the linguistic analysis of a case involving the implementation of an ICT system for the technical department of a European low cost airline. The case provides empirical data on the dynamics of resistance to change. The data bring out the clash of professional discourses between different groups of professionals. Our outcomes indicate the importance of making explicit the implicit definitions, assumptions, beliefs and expectations from groups of professionals involved in change projects. Paying attention to the language used during processes of sense making can reduce resistance to change.

The organisation of the paper is as follows. First, we will review the literature on change management and the place of the resistance to change theme therein. Discourse-related aspects of change that are generally underexposed in traditional change management literature are shown. Subsequently, we discuss the research

methodology and present the results from our case study. Finally, we offer conclusions, limitations and issues for further research.

### Literature review

Resistance to change is a recurring theme in the change management literature (Cummings and Worley, 2005; Senior and Swailes, 2010). The way in which it is defined depends on the chosen theoretical perspective. Two main perspectives can be identified:

- (1) conventional change management literature; and
- (2) critical perspectives on change management.

For excellent overviews of the conventional perspective, see Armenakis and Bedeian (1999), Pettigrew *et al.* (2001), and Beer and Nohria (2000). Shared core assumptions in the conventional perspective are that change is imperative (change is good, stability is bad) and that change should be managed and controlled (Weick and Quinn, 1999). Furthermore, the models and approaches for managing change are framed in the interest of management (Sturdy and Grey, 2003).

In contrast, critical change management literature questions whether change and stability are two mutually exclusive and objective states. The interpretation might depend on the perspective and position of the person defining it. Stability might be “unnoticed change” (Kanter *et al.*, 1992). Also, change is not idealised, as it is unlikely that all organisational members will be enthusiastic about the *n*th change project (Brown and Humphreys, 2003).

#### *Conventional change management literature*

In the conventional change literature, resistance to change is generally perceived as “collateral damage” of change endeavours. Resistance can have many different appearances, varying from foot-dragging, withdrawal, material sabotage and whistleblowing (Carr and Brower, 2000) to strikes, working to rule and symbolic sabotage (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). As organisational change is conceived of as desirable and inevitable, people resisting it are framed as irrational. This framing entails that resistance should be managed and overcome (Atkinson, 2005).

Within the boundaries of conventional change management literature, several alternative perspectives on resistance to change are found. Piderit (2000) suggests that it is a multi-dimensional concept. A multi-dimensional concept implies that the dichotomy of being for or against change is too simplistic, not reflecting the complex reality of people’s responses to change programs. Related to this concept, Fleming and Spicer (2003) state that studies on resistance should consider subjective states as well as actions. Sometimes people overtly follow a change initiative, while covertly being resistant, taking a cynical stance and legitimising their compliant action as “not me”. Yet another perspective is found in Ford *et al.* (2008), who show that resistance to change can be generated by biased managerial sense-making or can result from ineffective, unethical change management practices. Furthermore, they reframe resistance as a resource for enhancing change effectiveness. By paying careful attention to the change critics, management can discover weak points in the change approach. These publications illustrate that new perspectives on resistance are being

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explored, yet it still is assumed that change is undisputedly desirable and that change and resistance can and should be strictly managed.

*Critical change management literature*

In the critical change management literature, two themes dominate when resistance to change is discussed:

- (1) power; and
- (2) discourse.

The first theme associates resistance to change with unequal power relations. Critical change management authors state that in mainstream (change) management theory, power is circumvented by using euphemistic concepts such as leadership, governance, empowerment, etc. (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009), but observers should not ignore the social realities of power (Pfeffer, 1992). By paying attention to power dynamics, different perspectives on resistance to change can be brought to light.

Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) suggest that power can be understood from three different perspectives. First, power can be defined as a restraining force, where one actor makes people do things that they otherwise would not have done. In this view, resistance is an unconcealed reaction to the overt use of force. This perspective resembles the conceptualisation of resistance to change in conventional change management literature.

The second perspective on power focuses on how ideologies and cultural socialisation make people comply with the existing order, without explicit force and avoiding overt conflicts. This social power entails that a certain discourse becomes the naturally accepted one, creating the identities, values and social practices of those involved (Grant and Marshak, 2011; Mumby, 2001; Hardy and Phillips, 2004). This view articulates the manipulative side of power. Employees are depicted as being at the mercy of their managers who apply discursive techniques to silently imbue the workers with compliant mindsets. Resistance is almost impossible because the dominant discourse is seen as the natural order of being, prohibiting reflection upon it.

The third perspective conceptualises power as a productive force and an integral element of all human relating (Homan, 2010; Stacey *et al.*, 2000). For people to collaborate, they have to interact and arrive at a certain degree of shared understanding (Weick, 1995). Characteristic of this interaction is a struggle for meaning (Gergen, 2000) resulting in a “negotiated reality” (Eden and Ackermann, 1998). Resistance is now viewed as an integral element of the power play. This third perspective on resistance and power is particularly useful to understand and analyse the type of resistance discussed in this paper.

A key term in this perspective is “discourse” (Sturdy and Grey, 2003; Monge and Poole, 2008). Discourse analysis provides an alternative approach for studying organisational change management and resistance (Sturdy and Grey, 2003), and it has become an important methodological stance in organisation studies (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011; Grant and Marshak, 2011; Grant *et al.*, 2004). Organisational discourse can be defined as “the structured collections of texts embodied in the practices of talking and writing that bring organisationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated and consumed” (Grant *et al.*, 2004, p. 3). This perspective is based on the idea that organisations are made up out of discourse

(Monge and Poole, 2008). That is, organisational communication leads to stories, which are made and remade, and are combinations of “talk” in formal (e.g. meetings, public discourse) and informal (e.g. coffee breaks, sub-public discourse) settings. Language is regarded as a vehicle to construct meaning instead of a medium to transmit information (Garzone and Archibald, 2010). Hence, language is an essential part of individual and collective sense-making processes. Talks, conversations, and use of language are expressions of one’s beliefs and reflect the social community to which one belongs. Most functionally oriented organisations contain various discourses (Biber *et al.*, 2007). In fact, each professional develops his own professional language based on education and experience and develops his language further by interacting with peers.

Discourse analysis of organisational change and resistance processes has been undertaken mostly from a “vertical”, hierarchical perspective. For instance, Dunford and Jones (2000) and Knights and Willmott (1992) investigate how top managers convince lower-level employees of the importance of a change project. These authors focus on the language and rhetorical strategies managers use to convince their subordinates. Furthermore, Brown and Humphreys (2003), Doolin (2003), Grant *et al.* (2006) and Swanberg O’Connor (1995) uncover the discrepancies between management and employee discourses with regard to change endeavours. They study the tug of war between professional groups, as it is reflected in discourses, and the implications for the (in)effectiveness of organisational changes.

Discourse problems also emerge in the horizontal dimension of interaction involving peer groups: For example, project team members of different departments that have to cooperate in implementing change projects. When people from different professional backgrounds interact, the same words might be interpreted differently; varying interpretations prohibit the development of shared mental models. Conversations continue without real mutual understanding, leading to confusion. The confusion fuels negative emotions and resentment, which in turn might lead to “mental withdrawal”, i.e. not being receptive to the ideas of others, declassifying, and negative thinking about “the other”. From then on cooperation is difficult, changes meet resistance, and the change project is doomed to fail.

An important condition for convergence of meaning is the ability of people to reflect on their own and the other parties’ discourses, so that they can adjust their language in response to its effects on the other parties. Characteristic of professional communities is their collective use of a specific set of discourses, concepts, analytic reasoning styles and tropes. Moreover, typically loyalty of professionals is geared towards their own colleagues who speak the same language and have the same mindset. This loyalty will cause professionals to orient themselves primarily on the discourse and language of their fellows, instead of members of other professional communities. The dynamics of not understanding each other’s thoughts and discursive worlds can cause cooperative change efforts to break down, ending in frustrated professionals who refuse to take the interests of the others seriously. This form of resistance is the focus of our empirical study.

In this study we analyse the vertical as well as the horizontal dimension of discourse dynamics. We regard management as a professional group using a specific discourse in addition to other professional groups that have their own discourses. In our view, the misalignment of these discourses can be a major source of resistance to change. We

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argue that this misalignment is related to differences in professional values, mindsets and assumptions about the identity of other professional groups.

## Methodology

### *Data collection*

We adopted a qualitative research design aimed at describing the communication among professionals during a change process. This design allows us to develop insights that may be hard to acquire through the use of other research designs employing survey data or public documentation (Bonoma, 1985; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). A discourse analysis provides in-depth insights in the causes of resistance to change. Our case involves the implementation of an ICT system for the technical department of a European low-cost airline based in The Netherlands. The change process is intensively followed over a period of two years (2008-2009) using participatory action research, in which the researcher worked closely with consultants and participated in and/or observed the change process. This case was chosen because it provided us with an information-rich setting in which professionals on different organisational levels (e.g. management, staff, shop floor) interact during a change process.

Data was gathered by:

- semi-structured interviews;
- desk research;
- observation of team sessions; and
- a diagnostic workshop with the management team and project leaders, set up to chart the progress of the ICT system implementation.

We conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with employees of the technical department. The interviews took between 30 minutes and 90 minutes. Interviewees approved the transcripts of interviews. The interviews allowed us to collect in-depth stories of the professionals' perceptions of the change project. The desk research contained an analysis of formal project documentation. We observed team sessions of the project team as well as a four-hour diagnostic workshop of the management team (three persons) and project leaders (two persons) that was conducted by an external consultant. The researcher (one of the authors of this article) observed and made notes. The formal diagnostic workshop was followed by a spontaneous informal discussion between the project leaders and the consultant, also observed by the researcher. From both discussions notes were made; the notes were coded and analysed (see Appendices 1 and 2).

### *Syntagmatic and semantic data collection*

Project documentation as well as interview transcripts were analysed using syntagmatic analysis with WordSmith. Syntagmatic analyses of written texts analyse structure on the sentence level and relationships between discursive parts, which reveal the underlying conventions (Ulijn and Strother, 1995). Additionally, semantic analyses were performed on the notes taken of the workshop and team sessions. Semantic analyses are used to identify meaning of humans in their language use (Searle, 1983, 1992). Attention was paid to:

- typical speech acts, including assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations, based on speech act theory (Searle, 1983, 1992);
- negotiation style, including cooperative, non-cooperative, meta communication and general (Ulijn and Strother, 1995); and
- conversation style, including initiative, understanding, performance and closure (Ford and Ford, 1995).

Table I provides an overview and definitions. Whereas these analytical foci are mostly used separately in linguistic analysis, we combine them to provide a comprehensive insight on the interaction dynamics between professional groups.

*Data analysis*

Notes taken during the diagnostic workshop were transcribed, and the selected utterances were coded according to speech acts, negotiation and conversation styles. For the negotiation style the four categories of discourse types of Ulijn and Strother (1995) were adopted and used as scoring rubrics (Table II). For coding speech acts and

<i>Speech acts</i> Searle (1983), Ford and Ford (1995), Quinn and Dutton (2005)	<i>Negotiation style</i> Ulijn and Strother (1995)	<i>Conversation style</i> Ford and Ford (1995)
<i>Assertives</i> Claims supported by evidence, true and false statements	<i>Non-cooperative</i> This behaviour shows non-cooperativeness, and disagreement by using utterances that criticise, denies, disapprove, object, reject, show indignation and/or irritation	<i>Initiative phase</i> This phase relies on assertions, directives, commissives, and declarations
<i>Directives</i> Request, to get someone to do something (e.g. invitations, instructions, orders, and commands)	<i>Cooperative</i> This behaviour shows cooperativeness, agreement by using utterances that admit, confirm, inspire, give confidence, emphasise cooperation and/or show goodwill	<i>Understanding phase</i> Generally characterised by assertions and expressives. Claims are made, evidence and testimony given, hypotheses examined, beliefs and feelings explored, and contentions maintained
<i>Commissives</i> Promises or natural responses to a request committing to a future action	<i>General</i> This supporting kind of speech acts use utterances that ask for understanding, confirmation, information to explain, request, stipulate and/or suggest	<i>Performance phase</i> An interplay of directives (requests) and commissives (promises) spoken to produce a specific result
<i>Expressions</i> An affective state (e.g. worries, apologies, personal problems)	<i>Meta communication</i> This supporting kind of speech acts use utterances that conclude, close, engage, offer, promise, propose, remind, repeat, resume and/or specify	<i>Closure phase</i> Characterised by assertions, expressives, and declarations to bring about an end to the interaction process
<i>Declarations</i> Create a new set of opening conditions		

**Table I.**  
Speech acts, negotiation and conversation styles used in the semantic analyses

Non cooperative	Cooperative	General	Meta communicative
To ...	To ...	To ...	To ...
[1] ignore a reproach	[22] confirm	[30] reassure	[45] recommend
[2] interrupt	[23] tone down	[31] ask for understanding	[46] engage
[3] convince	[24] admit	[32] warn	[47] promise
[4] defend	[25] be forthcoming	[33] ask for conformation	[48] agree
[5] account for	[26] show goodwill	[34] ask for information	[49] remind
[6] justify	[27] inspire confidence	[35] wish	[50] corroborate
[7] correct	[28] approach	[36] ask	[51] emphasise
[8] reject criticism	[29] emphasise	[37] request	[52] repeat
[9] sneer		[38] threaten	[53] exemplify
[10] show indignation		[39] stipulate	[54] explain
[11] show irritation		[40] demand	[55] illustrate
[12] deny		[41] command	[56] specify
[13] reprove		[42] suppose	[57] decide
[14] reproach		[43] predict	[58] resume
[15] blame		[44] suggest	[59] conclude
[16] object			[60] close
[17] argue			[61] propose
[18] demur to			[62] offer
[19] criticise			[63] change topic
[20] disapprove			[64] announce
[21] reject			

**Table II.**  
Rubrics within the negotiation style (based on Ulijn and Strother, 1995)

conversation styles, we used the rubrics “weak”, “neutral” and “strong” (detailed descriptions with example utterances can be requested from the authors). Coding always contains subjectivity. In order to provide as much rigour as possible, we employed a group of trained coders and analysed inter coder reliability.

### Case study

The case involves the implementation of an ICT system, TRAX, for the technical department of a European low-cost airline. The need for a new ICT system emerged when the supplier of the existing application could no longer support it. In January 2008, a project organisation was assembled to select a new system. A group of key users, consisting of employees from every department of the organisation, did the initial mapping, design and construction of a test environment. Testing was finished in September 2008. Subsequently, the group developed training material and organised training schedules for about 200 end users. The application would go live on 29 January 2009. A consultancy firm was involved in September 2008; at that time management experienced serious resistance to change on the part of employees and started doubting the chances of successful implementation.

Note that historic events might have fuelled resistance to change. Two years earlier a reorganisation program offered several employees other, less interesting jobs. These painful experiences still resonated in the organisation. In this study we solely focus on the differences in discourses between professional groups and their role in the experienced resistance to change.

The following professional groups are distinguished:

- end users of the new ICT system;
- key users who are delegates of the end users and responsible for the development and testing of the ICT system; and
- (project) management, responsible for the overall implementation.

The key users consist of employees from several professional backgrounds, namely engineering, aircraft maintenance, and purchasing and logistics.

Discourse contains both spoken and written language. We divide the description of the discourse analysis into four sections:

- (1) discourse in written project documentation;
- (2) discourse in formal interviews with individual employees;
- (3) discourse during informal conversations between employees; and
- (4) discourse during and after formal team sessions.

#### *Written project documentation*

To gain insights in the written language we performed a word count analysis on five project documents. Three documents were written by project management:

- (1) project initiative document;
- (2) test script user acceptance test (UAT) document; and
- (3) the end of project document.

The fourth document was a newsletter written by the management team, and the fifth was a functional and impact document, written by a consultant.

An analysis of these documents by WordSmith resulted in a top 20 of frequently used words, which proved to be all content-related, for example “board”, “business”, “implementation”, “update”, “application”. The general discourse of these written documents was formal and technical and illustrates a typical management discourse. It is assumed that the ideas of management will be unquestionably adopted by the employees (Sturdy and Grey, 2003). No mention is made of possible implementation problems due to resistance to change. Apparently the assumption is that, once clear project instructions are given, people will automatically do what is expected of them.

#### *Formal interviews with employees*

Interviews were held with employees from different professional groups. Interviews with managers indicated an expectation of resistance to change from their department. The language they used to describe this expectation can be linked to the specific professional background of each department.

TRAX is important for the technical department. However, the manager aircraft maintenance hangs on to the “good old things”, trying to do business as usual. [...] With the implementation of TRAX we redesign work processes, meaning that aircraft maintenance should be in lead regarding administrative work. This is a common way of working within airline companies that use TRAX, so it must be possible here too. [...] I want more awareness and acceptance for TRAX within the management team of the technical department and the end users (Overall project leader).

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“... the work of the maintenance employees should not become more difficult. They have to do maintenance and not all kind of administration. That will take too much time! (Manager aircraft maintenance).

We excel in solving acute problems. When problems require creative solutions our employees are always motivated. However, we are not very structured in translating these solutions into concrete work instructions. [...] my employees are not used to strict planning schedules; they need flexibility (Manager engineering).

we have to cope increasingly with legislation issues and international aviation laws, leading to more formalities and documentation (Manager purchasing and logistics).

I think TRAX is a good system that has a lot to offer and can really improve our way of working in the long term. But I do not hear our management about this long-term perspective. It would be good if they showed their ambition on this! (Business project leader).

Interviews with individual employees in the key and end user groups confirmed the differences in the sense-makings across groups with different professional backgrounds:

#### *Key user group*

We are enthusiastic about the new system and we feel very involved, but it lacks long term vision. The possibilities of TRAX are not fully exploited. We do not know whether this will change in the near future (Aircraft maintenance).

The direction is clear; we need a new ICT system! The old platform is outdated. However, the impact of this change on the work processes is not clear to everyone (Engineering).

We find it difficult to train direct colleagues, we are not really trainers [...] We used to have an open and informal way of working. However, since the aviation law in 1994 we have to follow procedures and rules. The “old days” of just doing what seemed right are over (Purchasing and logistics).

#### *End user group*

We find it especially difficult to work with the new system because it has a completely new look and feel”. “. . . I think using TRAX is a bad idea, we still have the old system which is doing fine. Why spend all this money and effort? (Aircraft maintenance).

... TRAX is just working as Windows and I'm familiar with that, so I think it will be easy (Engineering).

We do not know everything yet, of course our key user informs us about developments. However we have to work with TRAX after only a short, one day training (Purchasing and logistics).

The quotes show the variety in perceptions about the change project across professional groups (managers, key users and end users) and across employees with different professional backgrounds (aircraft maintenance, engineering and purchasing and logistics). The differences among professional backgrounds are most prominent. Aircraft maintenance employees are very precise. Often they find that there is only one optimal solution to a problem, either black or white. They are critical and analytic and want to know the details. Engineering employees prefer to see the big picture. In their

work, they oversee the entire plane, designing maintenance tasks for aircraft maintenance employees. Purchasing and logistics employees have an eye for administrative tasks and want to collect data on as much indicators as possible.

With regard to the professional groups, managers mainly look for the big picture and adopt abstract reasoning. Key users are quite similar by also looking for the general direction in which the company should go. End users are more focused on the actual work.

*Informal conversations between employees*

In addition to the formal interviews, informal conversations were observed between employees of different departments during lunch breaks. A key user from aircraft maintenance stated:

... administration for ordering parts is much work and it is difficult. We have to train many people within our department which will be hard.

An employee from logistics responded:

... I know, but that is just one of the changes and we knew this upfront! Perhaps we can arrange a work-around [...] Give us a call, we do the administration and then we stick to the current procedure. However, we have to agree on a date when we really start working according to the new responsibilities.

An employee from engineering suggests:

... perhaps this is not right. When TRAX is up and running, employees need to work conform the new process flows. Maybe we use this work-around only during "out-of-office" times.

The logistics employee responded:

... I will make a detailed work instruction which will be the way of working during "out-of-office" times. During daytime logistics can update administration with the overnight data.

The subgroups conversations show the problem-solving attitude that is characteristic of technicians. The quotes reflect the different professional discourses. The aircraft maintenance employee wants to minimise administrative tasks; the engineer is practical and suggests use of the work-around during out-of-office hours; the logistics employee wants to make detailed work instructions.

Formal interviews and informal discussions differed in tone. The formal communication of management was based on increasing service quality (long-term goal), while the informal communication focused on implementing the ICT system within time and budget (short-term focus). Table III shows illustrative utterances per professional group. Overt utterances reflect the tone in the written project documents. In formal discourse, the key users are involved and enthusiastic, but informally they state their doubts about the long-term benefits of the system. Management seems to speak with a "double tongue". The written project documents management endorsement of the implementation. However, the interviews reveal that managers question the long-term benefits of the new system. Managers do not openly voice their doubts, because they are afraid to induce resistance to change by employees. Management seems to believe that employees accept the formal message, but in fact

**Table III.**  
Formal and informal reactions of different professional groups

Reactions	End users	Professional group	
		Key users	Management
Formal discourse	“We do not know enough about the new system”	“We are involved and enthusiastic about the possibilities of this new system”	“We fully agree with the implementation of this new ICT system”
Informal discourse	“We find it difficult to start with the training sessions and learn how the new ICT system works” “We first have to see it first, before believing in its merits”	“There is no long term vision, we will not benefit enough from the system this way” “We are afraid of providing training ourselves”	“Do not discuss the long term perspective, that will give resistance” “We want this new system as long as it does not lead to more administration for our engineers”

most employees are sceptical because they sense the inconsistency in the messages they receive. By speaking with a “double tongue” management could very well be seeding resistance to change (Ford *et al.*, 2008).

#### *Team sessions: key users*

During a key user session we observed the development in the interaction between employees from different professional groups. Although the group had been working together for quite some time, discussions were unstructured and scattered, with frequent changes of subject. No decisions were made. Repeatedly, new issues were brought up; such issues were listed and redirected to management for a decision. Participants often used assertives (claims), holding on to their own professional discourse. Frequently, the conversation styles did not evolve beyond the understanding phase (see Table I), and few examples of cooperative behaviour could be registered. In this mixed professional setting, it appeared to be hard to arrive at shared mental models.

#### *Team session and informal discussion: managers*

We used discourse tools to analyse the workshop and the informal discussion. Appendices 1 and 2 report the detailed results from our observations. The speech acts, negotiation and conversation styles per role are shown in Table IV. The speech acts of managers and project managers frequently show assertives (claims). This reflects the technical background of managers and project managers, who prefer hard evidence and clear answers on detailed questions.

Table IV indicates that general managers differ from project managers in their negotiation style. General managers predominantly use meta-communication, which is less prominent in the language use of project managers. This type of communication might stem from the fact that the general managers envision their role as communication facilitators. They do not focus on the details of work processes. However, general managers and project managers were not aware of their discourse differences and its possible influence on the interactional quality of the discussions and implications for resistance to change. During the workshop, managers and project managers showed a cooperative negotiation style while talking to peers. Also in the

	Manager				Project manager				Consultant				Total
	W	N	S	T	W	N	S	T	W	N	S	T	
<i>Speech acts</i>													
Assertives	2	3	9	14	1	4	4	9	0	1	0	1	25
Directives	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	1	0	1	4	5	8
Commissives	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	2
Expressives	0	4	3	7	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	9
Declarations	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2
Total = > minus 10 double counted													46
<i>Conversation style</i>													
Initiative	0	2	3	5	0	1	2	3	0	0	3	3	11
Understanding	0	1	8	9	0	3	6	9	0	1	0	1	19
Performance	2	0	1	3	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	5
Closure	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2	2	3
Total = > minus 2 double counted													38
<i>Negotiation style</i>													
Non cooperative	3	2	1	6									
Cooperative	8	4	1	13									
General	9	4	3	16									
Meta communication	6	4	4	14									
Total = > minus 13 double counted													49

**Table IV.**  
Speech acts, conversation style and negotiation style per role counted during the diagnostic workshop

**Notes:** W = weak; N = neutral; S = strong

informal discussion afterwards, with only project managers present, the negotiation style was cooperative.

In the formal meeting the conversation style tended towards an understanding phase. Yet, the group barely reached the performance and closure phases in their discussion, indicating that the cooperative negotiation style was rather superficial and only existed among employees with the same background. This superficiality also surfaced in the informal conversation afterwards in which two project managers were gossiping about a manager from another professional group.

All in all, many non-cooperative styles were used regarding other professional groups and the change process in general (Appendices 1 and 2), leading to difficulties for sharing one mental model. This lack of cooperation might be the cause of the resistance towards cooperation needed for implementing the ICT system.

#### *How did it end?*

The consultant increased the awareness about differences in discourse related to professional groups during the meetings, resulting in several rules of conversation. The rules were written down and got a prominent place in the project room. These rules helped the professionals to be aware of their different discourses and deepen their conversations towards a performance and closure phase.

Our observations showed that over time discussions became more constructive. We have strong indications that the awareness of different discourses made cooperation

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among employees more successful, as employees gradually learned to accept and deal with their differences in language use. They respected each other's discourse, taking time to try to understand what others are saying. This respect suggests that the misaligned professional discourses were indeed an important reason for the resistance to cooperate in the implementation of the new system. These findings provide additional, albeit circumstantial, evidence for our argument that differences in discourse of professional groups can be related to resistance to change.

Currently, a year has passed, and employees are using the new system, which seems to be broadly accepted, although a few individuals are still sceptical and resistant. We ascribe this to the negative experiences with the reorganisation in previous years.

### **Conclusion, discussion and recommendations**

As an addition to the contemporary literature on resistance to change, the case study illustrates that resistance to change and difficulties in cooperation in a specific change project can be related to unarticulated non-alignments of professional discourses.

The theoretical contribution of this study is that we combine change management literature with linguistic literature about professional discourse. In this way we provide an original approach to analyse resistance to change in change projects. We also add to the literature on professional cultures in organisations (e.g. Bloor and Dawson, 1994) by concluding that in interactions between professional cultures unarticulated differences in discourse can be related to resistance to cooperation and change. Whereas studies about discourse analysis of organisational change have been undertaken mostly from a "vertical", hierarchical perspective (e.g. Dunford and Jones, 2000; Knights and Willmott, 1992; Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Doolin, 2003; Grant *et al.*, 2006), we additionally investigate the horizontal dimension of interaction, involving peer groups. We contribute to the discourse analysis literature concerning change management by analysing actual speech acts, which is typical of linguistic studies.

The methodological contribution of our study lies in the simultaneous use of different discourse measurement tools (Singleton and Straits, 2010; Jick, 1979). We performed discourse analyses on speech acts, negotiation styles as well as conversation styles. Using these tools together and analysing the research data in a quantitative way enabled us to uncover the dynamics of the sense making processes among different professionals and the problems they had in cooperating and coming to agreements. The speech acts analysis showed that some professionals predominantly resort to assertives, while other professionals mainly use different speech acts, namely general and meta-communication. A lack of reflection upon these differences probably caused the relationships among the professional groups to deteriorate; this finding is in line with findings of Hardy *et al.* (2005). Professional groups scorned each other in informal conversations, leading to difficulties in reaching performing and closing conversational styles. The analysis of the negotiation styles indicated that formal conversations predominantly showed cooperative styles, while in informal settings the utterances were identified as non-cooperative. This non-cooperation might be another reason for the fact that many discussions did not extend beyond the understanding phase.

This study has some limitations. First, the formal discourse analysis was based on transcripts from only two sessions with the group of (project) managers. However, the

observed patterns in these two sessions were clearly recognisable in other meetings and informal conversations and hence can be considered as characteristic. Second, the selection of utterances in the discourse analysis was somewhat subjective. However, these utterances represented the most crucial turns in both meetings and reflect the overall gist of the discussions.

With regard to future research, we plead that studies on resistance to change should incorporate linguistics and discourse analysis, as this can result in new perspectives on the causes of resistance to change. Research on resistance to change could pay more attention to differences in professional cultures in cross-functional or even virtual teams in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the situation. It appears to be difficult for different professional groups to develop a shared mental model when not being aware of and sensitive to their own professional discourse and the professional discourses of others. In this respect, our case study illustrates the statement of Jones *et al.* (2004) that it is paramount to analyse the perspectives of “all stakeholders and to go beyond the top-down advice to managers” (p. 741). With a focus on inter-group relationships, the dynamics of organisational change might be better understood leading to redefining and resituating the role of “resistance to change” in change management.

As to the managerial implications of our study, we find that differences in professional discourse should be made explicit and be a constant point of attention in (project) teams. Managers typically think that it is not their role to interfere in the details of change projects. Yet, by adhering to this perspective, managers will use a specific discourse, specific kinds of speech acts and certain negotiation styles, which might not be understood by other professional groups. Thus, an explicit reflection on their own style and its effects on the interaction dynamics could help managers to develop a broader view on the implementation of change and possible resistance on the part of employees, thereby creating more and new options for action.

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Appendix 1. Utterances and coding of formal workshop (chronological)

Professional discourses

No. of discourse fragment	Role	Utterances	Speech Act weak/neutral/strong	Negotiation Style see Table 2 for ##	Conversation Style weak/neutral/strong
1	Mgr AM	Do not make it to complicated. In my opinion we should be aware of the extra administrative workload for the technicians. If they have to do more work they will have less time to do maintenance.	assertive (strong)	general (31, 32, 37)	initiative (strong)
2	PL Overall	This is something you keep on saying. I think it is your job to show the technicians they are crucial in this project. The aircraft maintenance department has the most employees and they will have to work with the system.	assertive (strong)	non-cooperative (7, 19)	initiative (strong) understanding (strong) performance (weak)
3	Mgr P&L	By the way, why is our manager Technical Department not in this workshop? It is important for him to hear this discussion.	assertive (weak) directive (neutral) expressive (strong)	general (31, 44)	initiative (neutral)
4	Consultant	I agree, but he some other important meetings that were already planned. I think we can also speak for him, you know him all very well.	commissive (neutral)	cooperative (24)	understanding (neutral)
5	Mgr Eng	Should we also ask our Information Technology specialist to join us? I think he might be very helpful in some discussions.	directive (neutral)	meta-communicative (45, 50)	initiative (neutral)
6	Consultant	No, this workshop is mend to see how the most influencing people; you, think about this change project. We will not go in details about the system.	declaration (strong)	non-cooperative (6, 21) meta-communicative ( 54, 57)	closure (strong)
7	PL Business	Well I know also a lot of details about TRAX, so if we come to that point both [PL Overall] and I can give answers.	commissive (weak)	cooperative (26, 28)	understanding (neutral)
8	Mgr Eng	Ok let's start. We all know this change is absolutely necessary. There is no other option. We all know that!	expressives (strong)	cooperative (22, 24, 25)	initiative (strong)
9	Mgr AM	Yes but we also know that there is a group of employees within Aircraft Maintenance that are absolutely not used to work with ICT tools. They are also not used in working with the current application and always use detailed manuals in their work. This group is about 20 employees and in particular older in age.	assertive (strong)	cooperative (22, 23) non-cooperative (3, 16) general (32, 39)	understanding (strong)
10	Mgr Eng	Ok, that is only a small group. The TRAX system is of great importance for further development and existence of the Technical Department. There is no discussion about that. With this system we can make a real big step. The investment should secure our continuity.	assertive (strong)	cooperative (27) meta-communicative (51, 56)	performance (weak)
11	PL Overall	We started the implementation of TRAX because the old system will not longer be serviced by the supplier. Using it longer would increase the risk on system failures and would be irresponsible	assertive (neutral)	general (32, 43)	understanding (strong)
12	Mgr Eng	The CEO might ask us the question: what are the savings within the Technical Department now we have implemented TRAX?	assertive (weak) expressive (neutral)	general (34, 37, 43)	performance (weak)
13	PL Overall	Well these savings (estimated) are described in the Project Initiation Document (PID). There is a business case with potential savings. I am more concerned about the involvement of the management in general. I try to do this as much as possible.	assertive (weak)	meta-communicative (54, 55, 59)	closure (neutral)
14	Mgr P&L	We all know the employees that are skeptical about this change project. However there are also employees that see the benefits. We should focus on them.	assertive (neutral) expressive (strong)	cooperative (24, 27)	initiative (strong)
15	Consultant	Ok, this might be a good moment to investigate which employees are positive and who are the more negative ones. I suggest we should focus on several clusters within the organization first and then consider people that are positive/negative about the change. We can put these on the flip chart. <i>[the groups starts a short discussion about the possible clusters]</i>	directive (strong)	general (37, 42, 44)	initiative (strong)
16	Consultant	Alright, after this discussion I think we get five clusters; 1) Office, 2) Project, 3) Information Technology, 4) Aircraft Maintenance and 5) MT Technical Department. Do you all agree?	assertive (neutral) directive (strong) declaration (strong)	general (33, 37) meta-communicative (55, 59)	performance (strong)
17	Mgr Eng	Well I know three employees [mentions names] of which two are really positive, they see changes in the future work processes. But the other one is very critical. He has a "not invented by me" mentality and does not believe in the new system because he is not involved. However, their impact is not very big on this project.	assertive (strong)	cooperative (24, 25) general (31, 32) meta-communicative (55, 62)	understanding (strong)
18	Mgr P&L	I have also two employees in my department. Both are skeptical. They first have to see the results and than they will believe it. They take nothing for granted but their impact on this project is also not very big.	assertive (strong)	cooperative (24, 25) general (32, 33) meta-communicative (62, 64)	understanding (strong)
19	Mgr AM	I think there are two employees on the Manpower department that are suspicious about the change. One of them also questions the role of the organization in this project. I think they are neutral about this change and have not really much influence	assertive (neutral)	meta-communicative (52, 61, 62)	understanding (strong)
20	Consultant	Ok, thanks! Let's take a closer look at different persons in the change project. So this is about you people sitting on this table. <i>[participants starts laughing and discussing about there own roles]</i>	directive (strong)	meta-communicative (58, 59, 61, 63)	initiative (strong)

(continued)

Figure A1. Utterances and coding of formal workshop (chronological)

No. of discourse fragment	Role	Utterances	Speech Act weak/neutral/strong	Negotiation Style see Table 2 for ##	Conversation Style weak/neutral/strong
21	PL Overall	Well, my impact is of course very big! I am positive about this change and I am responsible for timely delivery, with a high quality and user acceptance of the system.	assertive (strong)	cooperative (22, 26, 27)	understanding (strong)
22	PL Business	For me it is important that the business will accept the new system. I have some influence on this, however when the system works according to the user specifications it will be accepted by the users. I have some impact on that.	assertive (neutral)	cooperative (26, 29)	understanding (neutral)
23	PL Business	We have also selected the super users on their positive attitude. Their influence on, and involvement with the new system is big. But they are all positive and expect great things from TRAX.	assertive (strong)	cooperative (22, 27) meta-communicative (54, 58)	understanding (strong)
24	PL Overall	What do you think about the project members concerned with Information Technology? Of course they are facilitating in this project but their impact on a successful system is big. After all they are positive about the change.	expressives (neutral)	general (32, 33, 43, 36)	initiative (neutral)
25	Consultant	Let's take a closer look at the Information Technology Department. What do they think about this change? What is your impression?	directive (neutral)	general (34, 37, 42)	initiative (strong)
26	PL Overall	I think both the Manager's Operations ICT and Information Management are positive. Manager Operations is concerned about "keeping the system up and running". The manager Information Management will be responsible for further development of TRAX. She has to organize the IT support.	assertive (neutral)	meta-communicative (54, 59)	understanding (neutral)
27	Mgr AM	I think it is well known that some of my employees are very negative about everything. This has to do with the reorganization last year. Some are very clear about their situation: "first you [Mgr AM] reorganize my job and then you ask me to do more administration". Another states "you have messed up my last three years here". And of course we have one employee who is always against everything. The impact of these employees on this project is not that big. However, we have to keep this in our mind during the roll out phase.	assertive (strong)	non-cooperative (5, 11, 20)	understanding (strong)
28	PL Overall	An how about the team managers within your department?	directive (strong)	general (34, 36, 37)	initiative (strong)
29	Mgr AM	Well I do not know. Of course their impact is big on this project. They have to support the project and talk positive about it in their team. But I do not know what their interest might be in this project. They are positive about the change.	assertive (neutral) expressive (neutral)	general (31, 34)	understanding (neutral)
30	Mgr AM	And we have a lot of technicians that talk the same story of others; "first we have to see and then we believe in it". Other employees think METALS [the old system] is very bad. This new system can not be that bad. However they are skeptical about the user interface and the effort a user has to afford by using the new system in their work.	assertive (strong)	non-cooperative (20, 11) general (32) meta-communicative (55, 59)	understanding (strong)
31	PL Business	Ok, but we have also very positive employees. They think every change is fun and most of the young employees are very open minded to TRAX. These employees are also members of the Super User group.	assertive (strong)	meta-communicative (49, 55)	understanding (strong)
32	Consultant	Well we have talked a lot about other employees. Now I want to take a closer look on the people in the Management Team of the Maintenance Department. So, it is about your role in this project.	directive (strong)	meta-communicative (63)	closure (strong)
33	Mgr AM	I think TRAX will give us more and better management information. With this we can organize better maintenance in a controlled way. I am positive but also a little bit skeptical. I do not want that my people have to do more administration. That might be a problem with this system.	expressives (neutral)	general (31, 32, 39)	understanding (strong)
34	Mgr Eng	Well I am really very positive about TRAX. I am a senior user and member of the project board. My interest in a successful implementation is very big. I think it is about time we will have some stability in the organization. But I will tell everybody the necessity of this system for our Technical Department	assertive (strong)	cooperative (27, 29)	performance (strong)
35	Mgr P&L	I agree with my colleague. I also tell everybody about the necessity of TRAX. I am positive despite the implementation of the system will have some impact within my department.	assertive (strong)	cooperative (22, 26, 27)	understanding (strong)
36	PL Overall	Yes, unfortunately our manager Technical Department is not available. He of course is our principal. His goal is to achieve an optimal maintenance process and higher efficiency. However, he does not speak "the language". He is just in and is boarding on a fast train. I think his impact is big and he is positive about TRAX	assertive (neutral)	general (31, 32)	understanding (strong)

Figure A1.

No. of discourse fragment	Role	Utterances	Speech Act weak/neutral/strong	Negotiation Style see Table 2 for ##	Conversation Style weak/neutral/strong
1a	PL Overall	Well after this formal meeting I think it is good to tell you [the consultants] a little bit more about the history, just before this project started.	declaration (neutral)	meta-communicative (54, 56)	initiative (strong)
2a	PL Overall	In April 2008 a reorganization started within the Aircraft Maintenance Department. The maintenance teams were isolated teams and it was difficult to get insight on how they were working. Also the performance was quite different per team.	assertive (neutral)	meta-communicative (54, 55, 56)	initiative (strong)
3a	PL Business	Sometimes we scheduled maintenance at different hours just because we knew that a specific team was on shift. We knew they would not deliver a good job.	assertive (strong)	non-cooperative (20, 11) meta-communicative (53, 55)	understanding (strong)
4a	PL Overall	Yes, and the manager of the maintenance department agreed on this situation. He found there was no need to change this.	assertive (strong) expressive (strong)	meta-communicative (48, 55, 59)	understanding (strong)
5a	Consultant	OK, I understand. Did he want to keep the situation stable?	directive (neutral)	general (33, 34, 36, 37, 43)	initiative (neutral)
6a	PL Overall	Yes, but the manager Technical Department came in and he made a plan to change this situation. His goal was to separate management and operational tasks. He wanted more "control" and transparency in the maintenance processes. He also wanted to break up the strict social structure in the teams.	assertive (strong)	cooperative (22) general (30, 39)	understanding (strong)
7a	PL Business	For our manager Aircraft Maintenance this was a very bad project. It resulted in very negative reactions of his employees on the plan. Also the relationship between the Manager Technical Department and Manager Aircraft Maintenance got worse. But also the relationship between some of the employees and the Manager Aircraft Maintenance got very bad.	assertive (strong)	non-cooperative (14, 19) general (30, 31) meta-communicative (56)	understanding (strong)
8a	PL Overall	These employees saw their manager as the "bad messenger" who ruined the last years of their careers	assertive (strong)	meta-communicative (54, 56)	understanding (strong)
9a	PL Business	After this reorganization the old team leaders are replaced by three new and younger teamleaders. A new role of operational coordinator was created for these employees, but this is seen as a degrade.	assertive (neutral) declaration (neutral)	non-cooperative (3, 6) meta-communicative (54)	understanding (strong)
10a	PL Overall	Those degraded team leaders are very angry on "their Manager Aircraft Maintenance". They think he is responsible for all of this	assertive (strong)	meta-communicative (54, 55, 56)	understanding (strong)
11a	Consultant	Well, now I can understand the difficult relation between the Manager Technical Department and the Manager Aircraft Maintenance.	assertive (neutral) expressive (neutral) declaration (neutral)	cooperative (22, 28)	understanding (neutral)
12a	PL Overall	Well, this is just informal information but I think it is good to know this.	assertive (neutral)	meta-communicative (49, 58, 59, 60)	closure (neutral)

Figure A2. Utterances and coding of informal session (chronological)

About the authors

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