**Transcript for S15, E6 – The way we talk around here with Gill Ereaut**

Intro: Welcome to the future of internal communication podcast. I'm Jen Sproul, CEO of the Institute of Internal Communication.

Since we launched this series in 2021, the world of work has been disrupted by event after event. A pandemic, geopolitics, AI, extreme weather events, remote and hybrid working, generational shifts, inclusion, diversity - the entire nature of how we work needs transformation.

This podcast explores opportunities for internal communication in the future of work. Internal comms is a critical function that helps organisations achieve lasting change, building trust and relationship between people, in pursuit of shared goals.

Please, join me, Dominic Walters and Cat Barnard as we dissect what this means for internal communication.

With relentless change the new norm, it's time to reimagine our profession.

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Cat Barnard (01:00)

Hello and welcome to a fresh episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm your host Cat Barnard and as ever I am joined by Jen Sproul and Dominic Walters. I have to say one of the best bits of producing this podcast is that I get to invite really interesting people to have conversations with and mid late last year I came across a blurb of a book that really enticed me and I immediately thought about you, our listeners as internal communicators, I thought it would be of huge interest to you as well. So today, I want us to talk about the way we talk around here and I'm delighted to introduce our guest,  Gill Ereaut.  She is a researcher, author, speaker and organisational consultant and founder of the consultancy Linguistic Landscapes, which has been going for more than 20 years. That business has pioneered the application of language sciences to real organisational issues. Just as a tiny aside, I am absolutely fascinated in this topic because I did a degree in modern languages and there wasn't anything like what we're going to talk about presently when I was at university, that does not mean that I am a dinosaur. It just means that this is quite a modern line of research and inquiry. So Gill, as I say, is the author of a book called The Way We Talk Around Here, How Your Organisation's Culture Shows Up in Your Language and Why It Matters. And that book has already become an Amazon number one bestseller.

It's been highly commended in the People, Culture and Management category of the Business Book Awards in 2025 and one in the Stories and Conversations category of the Change Ninja Book Awards in 2025. Gill's background is in psychology. She's got degrees in psychology and contemporary cultural processes.

And has amassed more than 40 years experience in business consulting. Best bit about your bio though, by a country mile, sorry, as a lover of dogs is that you live in Oxford with an oversized whippet who is in the background right now. So if they bark, apologies. So you live with your whippet and probably too many books, a person after my own heart.

Gill, welcome.

Gill Ereaut (03:43)

Thank you very much Cat. It's a pleasure to be here.

Cat Barnard (03:47)

Really good to have you here for this conversation finally. I read your book late last year and as I say with my language graduate head on I was whizzing through it and just thinking, my goodness, my goodness. I had so many kind of mini aha moments. It was to be believed and so rather than try and give a really poor appraisal of your book, I wondered if you would be happy to start off by telling us about your work, which obviously led you to write the book. So tell us about your work and the trigger for writing the book.

Gill Ereaut (04:29)

Thanks Cat. In fact, at risk of going too far back in the life history, it actually started probably 25, 30 years ago. I worked for many years as a consumer researcher in qualitative market research and I've therefore spent a lot of time listening to people, which is great, customers, people, consumers, and taking insights from what those people said back into the client organisations who commissioned the work.

And I love listening to people.I  love ordinary quotes, ordinary people are the most fascinating creative, resource in the world. But what I got over the years, I got increasingly interested in the way that my client Organisations talked internally. Because we many times go through this experience of sitting in a briefing meeting with a big Organisation, consumer face,  consumer brand, we're not talking sort of esoteric businesses listening to the way that they describe their problem and the way they describe their customers and the customers' lives, because obviously they're trying to design products to address those consumer needs. And I would say they're thinking, it's really interesting the way you kind of have these solid concepts and constructs that are very real to you. And I suspect that when I go and talk to your customers, they won't have the same concepts at all. It won't be that they have a different name for the same idea. They just don't chop the world up into those categories. Their logic is very different. And that was often the case. So you go and talk to the customers, back with insights and findings. And for the period of time it takes to present the work, an hour, maybe doing it a few times, the insight was clear to them. That's really

helpful. That is a different way of thinking about our customers. We need to adjust our internal thinking to that. And in my observation, that affects last about three months.

Then it dies. And what I was observing, and I couldn't put a finger on it then, but I knew that language was somehow implicated, that during that period of time, it was like the insights, the new understanding got sucked back into like the gravitational pull of the existing organisational language. I would now call it discourse. Discourse being the mix of language and thinking. Thinking and language, they are kind of the same thing.

When we talk a bit more, I know we were later about discourse analysis itself, the important thing about it is language isn't a transparent medium through which we talk about a fixed reality, but language itself is part of creating that reality. So what I was observing were these internal realities. And what I was also observing was how wasteful this process was, because they would start making decisions and we'd sort of hear what they were doing and think, really? You understood that that probably wasn't going to land well, but they did it anyway. And then a few years later, of course, they'd come back and they'd asked for the same project to be done all over again, because the need hadn't gone away, the opportunity hadn't gone away, but they hadn't been able to absorb it. And I just got very interested in internal organisational language. And I set out really to try and find a way to, if I could use my research skills and I found this academic area that as you said Cat, was relatively new. I mean, it erupted in the mid 80s. **If I could put those together and help Organisations kind of see what they were doing to themselves, how they were getting in their own way, as some people would say, by having this very fixed internal reality with all these names and categories and ideas that were like a kind of set of paths in long grass or grooves, thinking grooves into which any new information snapped quickly into the old grooves**. So I started playing around with mixing approaches from academic language science with organisational problems to see what happened. And I had some lovely clients who were willing to experiment with me along the way. And from 2002 onwards, it just became very clear that there certainly was something powerful in taking that approach. Increasingly, the projects that I did moved from being help us communicate with our customers, certainly can do if you can understand where you're coming from internally, but they then move towards, can you help us sort out our culture problem? We kind of, we know we've got a culture problem, we can't quite define it, but can you help us do that?


Cat Barnard (08:51)

There were so many bits in the book that really chimed with me and so, and please correct me because I have a tendency to over paraphrase, but one of the things that stood out for me was an example that I think you gave, which is the migration in language within the UK's healthcare services where we have in recent years stopped talking about patients and now we talk about service users and what that does to the experience of the patient.

**Gill Ereaut (09:26)**

Yeah, yeah. there are a number of people sometimes say, you what should we be looking out for in language? And as you will see from having read the book, there is there's a very rich sort of toolbox of linguistic features if you like to look for and that can give you insight. But one of the most powerful ones is categories and labels. And, know, how something is categorised and what label it's given is it can be quite a blunt thing, but it is very telling. Another other forms of very powerful features to look out for would be pronouns. Who is the we around here and who is the they? And those we and they divisions are not always where you expect them to be. We've worked with at the extremes, one Organisation where almost pathologically everybody talks about we as the whole Organisation.

It was almost like a mantra, you know, we always meant this enormous, as it happened, global Organisation. And another Organisation where we only ever meant my little team. There was no corporate we in people's discourse in in their conversation. A single data point is not enough to draw conclusions, but they are very telling. Pronouns are very telling, not least because we don't really notice them. We don't notice them in use.

**Cat Barnard (10:40)**

I think there's something really interesting in there also because one of the pillars of theory in the future of work is that as these multiple meta trends converge upon one another, they will throw up challenges for Organisations that differ from context to context that fundamentally, there will be no one playbook for the future of work because the playbook will vary according to who's involved and what the circumstances are of a specific situation. so we've had this in the last week or so in a discussion that we've had internally. It's impossible absolutely impossible and pretty naive actually to assume that the future of work will play out multilaterally across countries in the similar,in an identikit way, singularly because the cultural variances country by country, continent by continent, business by business, business unit by business unit, there's so many layers of complexity that show up. And so it's interesting that you talk about the pronoun and the we because who is the we. We know we know that in 2026 we've got multinational organisations operating across borders across continents, etc. And in tandem rising geopolitical frictions that are threatening supply chains, causing economic instability in certain territories, really darkening the prospects of war. And people have very diverse views on how they feel about those risk factors. And so the construct of we becomes quite problematic, doesn't it? Because who is we?

And, and also sorry, just to throw another layer in, we are we, all of us are pretty subject to mass media every day for boding of prolific job losses to AI. And I don't know whether any of you guys have seen, but the Edelman Trust Barometer has just come out in the past week or so.

And it's talking about how trust now is absolutely, reduced to the most granular level of, I trust my friends and my very, very local community and the people that are directly around me. And therefore this construct of we becomes almost comedic, doesn't it?

Gill Ereaut (13:46)

I guess, I mean, we could probably do a whole podcast on the idea of we and the boundaries. But I think I just point to it really as a particularly good example of how the devil's in the detail in language. We often don't notice things like pronouns. We don't notice sometimes how people use passive and active and we feel them at a gut. We don't sort of notice them. But those are the things that if you kind of get your focal length right you can start to look at language for what it's doing, like not try and look through it at what people are saying, but actually look at how that language is being used, like the action, the work that particular language choices are performing to sustain a state of affairs or to create or disrupt a particular kind of relationship and so on. as I said, the toolbox and the set of concepts is very very rich and diverse. I I just wanted to play back to you without Chris coming at all, the use of the word playbook. You we have come to be very used to the word playbook, you know, in business Organisation life. But playbook, if I'm understanding it right, comes originally from American sport. It comes from American football. And it's one of a whole set of sporting. An example of a very widespread sporting metaphor, competitive sport metaphors that are used across business. mean, of course, the other one that people are very familiar with is that of warfare. But when we say playbook, I think we immediately place ourselves in essentially a competitive, combative kind of environment where we have to make our plans and here's our playbook and this is what we're going to do if they do this. And if you just, I mean, we use always the notion, it's an analytic thinking tool of the question, how could it be otherwise? How could that be said in a way? And what other kinds of terms could be used that would do a perfectly good job, but they would just carry a different weight and meaning? Not to say you should be using one of these other ones, it allows you, how it could be otherwise allows you to see the works being done by something like Playbook. So how would it sound if we talked about an organisation's script, for example, rather than Playbook?

You know, then you're in a theatre, then you're sort of, there's still a, are still being given lines to say and so on, so it's not completely free form, but it just conjures different kind of relationship, a different kind of set of relationships within organisation. So that's the, I'm very nerdy about this kind of stuff as you'd expect.

**Cat Barnard (16:16)**

Oh my God. Honestly, I could nerd out with you for hours on this topic. However, I don't want to hog the mic too much, Dom and Jen.

**Gill Ereaut (16:23)**

I think one of things we talked about before Cat was like, did I write the book? And I wrote it partly because I think worked with this for 20 years. I kind of wanted to get the ideas out there and invite other people to be curious and to look into how else,  I'd taken a particular way of turning this into a consulting business, but how else could you do it? But I also found increasingly that some people often have an intuitive sense that language matters in an Organisation. They'll say things like, yeah, this is just kind of like weird how we talk around here, or it really, really matters. I can't quite, people can't quite get a grip on why it matters or how, but they can often give examples of, like for example, well, playbook might be something that somebody notices, or service user, and they can point to details, but they can't necessarily get a hold of why does that bother them?

Why is it disconcerting? And so I wanted to just spread this out in a way that allows people to play with it. So that if you, this is not for everybody, because not everybody thinks that language matters that much.Iit's just language, just words. It was never just words, I would say. But if you don't think that language is ever just words, and I'm imagining that your, your listenership is probably of the view that language does matter because you spent a lot of time and care, picking the right words then you can go one step deeper into why does it matter and how does it matter and how can you pick apart what something is doing when you read it and think, that sounds a bit icky or, that sounded a bit aggressive or whatever it is.

**Dominic Walters (18:00)**

Gill, I'm going to join you and Cat and a bit of a nerd out about this because I love all this stuff about language. So I guess it'd be really good to focus on the word culture because you've obviously mentioned it a few times. And in our experience, in my experience of working with this, it's a negative phrase. I only ever get the word culture back from people when they don't like it or when they're trying to pull together things about the Organisation that they dislike.

I'm sure like me, you've probably heard people quote at you a number of times. Is it supposedly Hermann Göring who said when I hear the word culture I reached my pistol? It's not often we have Nazi people mentioned  on this particular podcast but it's an interesting quotation, apocryphal I'm sure, but a lot of people use it because they're disparaging about culture and so it'd be interesting first of all to explore a bit about that. I guess a good

starting place Gill is what's your definition of culture? What do you mean by culture and how does it affect people?

Gill Ereaut (19:00)

Yeah, totally. Let's leave Göring aside for now. So I mean, I found myself working in culture through the route I described rather than being a kind of cultural, organisational theorist and so on. But of course, one pokes about and finds that the way that culture has been theorised and often the way that it is spoken about and written about in mainstream business education.

And there are, I'm sure you know, approaches to culture that are described in big business schools and they are the subject of consulting companies products and come in and we'll do a culture diagnostic and so on. And one of things that has always bothered me is that culture is treated in that kind of discourse as a thing. It's an object.

It's like another piece of the kind of organisational structure and assets. And it's treated as something that can be managed and controlled and dictated and changed just like that by directive from above or that people can be persuaded through texts or workshops or whatever it is to change the culture. And it just doesn't seem to fit with how people actually experience culture, by which I mean the way it feels to work around here. And, people, think there is a really good reason why the expression, the way we do things around here is the one that is so frequently used around culture. Because what that to me gets is the essence of what culture is, which is how we do what we do, the manner in which things get done. Some of something it's about like what we do, but it's the manner in which things get done.

And that means that it's hard to get hold of it. And if you can't get hold of something and describe it accurately, you can't change it. Approaching a culture by saying, we need to map the culture, we'll do a staff engagement survey, is almost always going to fail because culture drops beneath the level of consciousness. I, a story, something I often say, I start, if I'm talking with a group of people within an Organisation to say to them, do you remember the first week or two you spent here? Or at any other Organisation or in any other group for that matter. For the first few weeks or months, you can hear the way it talks when you're new. People go, yeah, yeah, definitely have that experience. And then usually somebody will say, but I can't hear it anymore. It only takes a few weeks, months, occasionally you get somebody who can still hear it. And what's happened when you have stopped being able to hear it, is that in that language, when you first arrived, what you were hearing was effectively the expression of the culture. So if I think of culture as a sort of substrate, and I'll talk about Edgar Schein in a minute, but the kind of silent, unspoken assumptions, the view of the world, the how we do things around here and how we think around here, it pops up into specific language.

And even if you've come from the same industry and you go into a new Organisation, each Organisation has its own particular identity around that. And what happens is when you're new, you've got your no position to comment. You just have to get on and learn it. It's not just question of learning the jargon. What you're doing is learning the implication of this language. I boiled it down and you'll see in the book to three really fundamental questions that sit within culture is like **who are we and what we do and kind of what matters around here. That's number one. Number two is who are they out there like the non-organisation, those outside of us, whether they're customers, regulators, competitors, whoever it is. And what's the third thing is what's the nature of the relationships that we establish with those out there and within the organisation itself.**

So you've got really core ideas about identity and relation and relating that sit at that completely unspoken level. And when you first arrive, you're aware of this, but you have to just get on and work out how to operate within this Organisation. So you keep your job you've been given. But because people can't explicitly, they can't make that explicit, except when you're new, it fossilses. It just becomes the way we do things.

So in helping an Organisation to change, the process that I developed is to allow them to see it. So to take everybody, if you like, back to that first day or first few weeks at work where they can hear it. Because what happens is it gets out of date. So I'm just going to talk for a second about Edgar Schein. I'm sure many of your listeners will be familiar with Edgar Schein's model of Organisational culture.

It's simple, but it's really, really practical. And I think it's powerful. People recognise it very quickly. So Edgar Schein talks about a kind of three layer model of culture. So at the surface, you have what he calls artifacts, which are the things that are really easily observable in an Organisation, where people sit and dress and the color that the reception area is. And you can also take into that idea, like how the Organisation is structured and so language is part of what he calls artifacts. I would say it's a language is a super artifact. It has a very particular place and particularly usefulness. Next layer down is what Schein calls espoused values. We ended up calling them claims and wishes. And those are the things that the Organisation says it believes in and says it values. And this is how an Organisation, what an Organisation says its culture is. You know those things. Your listeners, some of them will be charged with writing those things and disseminating them. And they go on the wall, on reception and so on. And then underneath both of those are things that are out of language. And that's what I was saying before, the unspoken silent assumptions. I think Schein calls them basic assumptions and we tend to call them silent assumptions, unspoken, taken for granted, the norms.

And the point really is that those are by definition not in consciousness. They're not Freudian unconscious. They just drop out of view through that process I described. But they're extremely powerful because I would define, going back to your question, Dom, very convoluted way. One of the ways to think about culture is a set of absolutely unspoken rules of thumb. And I would express it often as if in doubt, do this.

If in doubt, what we do around here is this, or if in doubt, some other people talk about culture as what people do when they're not being observed, you know, what your staff do when you're not, when they're not being watched, which is a little bit, has a bit of a sinister kind of quality to it. But, if in doubt, do this, a simple rule of thumb. And so if you can excavate the nature of that, it often, it often proves to be having once in the past being adaptive and useful. But the world has moved on. That thing hasn't shifted because nobody's really conscious of it. And it becomes out of date. And a lot of problems come from the unspoken culture just trundling along in its own sweet way. While the consciousness of the Organisation or the leadership management communications, people are trying to make it different but nothing is shifting because people can't change something they can't articulate or see or recognise. **So what discourse analysis, this process of looking at language allows us to do is to look at surface language, look at the artefact of language on the surface, also to look at the claims and wishes, the statements of values and strategy and so on** and hypothesize what must be there for in order for this to make sense. So we wouldn't say this is your culture, but having sampled language and use these qualitative largely approaches to thinking about and looking for patterns in that language, we would say from the way you talk around here, it looks like these are your completely unspoken assumptions. And two questions then flow from that.

Do you recognize it? And at this point, usually people have got their heads in their hands going, oh my goodness, we do, don't we? And often they will say, I completely recognise that pattern that you've shown us and I've never seen it before. I've never noticed it, but I completely recognise what you've just shown me. And that's very powerful for people. And then the second question after, do you recognise it, is how far is this helping you? How far are the implications of this patterning of language, pointing to the unspoken assumptions, rules of thumb, the if in doubts, how far is that still relevant to your business now? Because it gets stuck. So it's a kind of whole, clients often refer to as holding a mirror up. And it's like using everyday language that litters the place. So notices on walls and emails and conversations that people have, using that as the data of culture because it's very powerful data if you look at it in a particular way. I don't know that quite answered your question, Dom, about how I talk about culture. **It's what we do, not what we have, I think, is the important thing.**

Dominic Walters (28:19)

I know that Jen will come on to look at discourse analysis more in a second, but can I just go back? You mentioned about, I suppose most organisations, work on the first two that you mentioned, so the look and feel of the place and the values they talk about. But clearly, as you said, the real culture is what's hidden and that's what you help people understand and start to work on. But I guess even the hidden culture is the product of lots of people making the best possible decisions according to circumstances. So I don't suppose there are many

that try and build up behaviours or language to be unhelpful they do these choices, these good choices for good reasons that can then suddenly not work. So in your experience why do you think lots of organisations do get the culture wrong? Because we know that they obviously do and it must be almost by accident but in your experience why is it?

Gill Ereaut (29:12)

Yeah. It's a really good question. I think it's not so much they get it wrong, but they let it go wrong. You know, it's about any kind of living creature and culture, not getting too fanciful about it, is a kind of living, breathing creature. It's being done all the time. It's how we do things. It's in conversations between people. It's in documents that are being exchanged. And that means that it can kind of creep off in a particular direction. And if you're iIf you're not watching it or I think worse maybe, if you kid yourself that you're in charge of it, then it can kind of, I mean, a number of processes, I mean, you can obviously, you know, get pockets of a particularly dysfunctional or, you know, or even toxic kind of culture that accrue around, maybe a couple of individuals can create a sort of subculture or a mini culture. But I think the mistake that Organisations make is to treat it like a thing that can be managed and that is on there, that they report on and that is a a a reified object. If you I think you have to think of culture as relational and indeed conversational. There's some you're probably familiar with. It's a fairly radical work about Organisations with but Ralph Stacey and Patricia Shaw, who talk about conversations as essentially being Organisations. Organisations do not exist except in and through relationships and conversations. Yeah, there are factories. Yeah, there are some hardware stuff, but essentially Organisations are about people in relation with each other, responding to each other in real time. That's quite radical view, but I think I'm probably somewhere on that spectrum of it.

Dominic Walters (30:56)

No, think there's a lot in there. I will pass over to Jen in a second, but this whole thing about conversations, it lends itself to the ongoing debate about the role of internal communication. We have this ongoing debate about to what extent are we responsible for engagement. And clearly we were not solely responsible for engagement. We can do things which influence it. And I think it sounds exactly the same with culture as communicators we have our hands on lots of different levers that can influence culture. But it sounds like no one actually is responsible for building the culture necessarily. understanding it being aware of it and its implications. That's a really very helpful insight I think.

Jennifer Sproul (31:29)

Now go on, Jill, you're going to say something then.

Gill Ereaut (31:30)

I was just going to say, if you think about culture as a living, breathing thing, then I think I would talk about intervening in culture or joining a conversation or rather than levers or change or anything more kind of hard because I'm not woo-woo about it. **These are really serious sort of organisational issues that affect productivity, they affect the success of an Organisation, however that's measured, whether it's public, private sector, whatever. But I think that the metaphor of an Organisation as a machine that can be controlled is so clearly not helpful, but it is really appealing and people hang on to it.** And I think one of the things that culture does is it kind of challenges that model because the, as everyone knows, **culture change is astonishingly hard**. And I think it's hard because people have gone at it with that model that it's a thing that can be pushed, pulled, affected, and so on. But I think your internal communication is in a much better position  to intervene, if you like, because you can join in that conversation, you can shape that conversation, you can introduce new topics in the same we would, we're doing in this podcast. You know, we're taking it in turns because there are certain kind of rules and conventions about how we do it. But we can, we're also, any of us can take the conversation off slightly. We can nudge it, you know, in a particular direction because it's a flowing, interactive, responsive thing.

That's probably a bit too woo-woo for now, but let's go.

Jennifer Sproul (33:05)

No, not at all. And I think there's so many of our listeners that will share that feeling and that emotion and the way that you described it. And I think it's that thing about trying to see it as a system and a process that can't fit in a system or a process. It doesn't work in that way. As you say, it can't be grasped or grappled.

But languages can be used as a way to understand the representation of that culture. But again, correct me if I'm wrong. I think about internal communicators and what we're there to do. We talk a lot about how can we help create shared meaning, shared understanding. But we all emotionally respond to language in different ways as well.

And I love it seeing that thing that we can really analyse beneath the surface to think about the opportunities for us as internal communicators who really value the craft of language, really value that craft of what is coming. And language, feel like sometimes we're in a catch and release with language as well. Everyone's talking about this, let's catch that one. And then we go, doesn't work, let's release it back to the wild and then we'll catch the next one. Rather than really getting beneath that unseen space that you've talked about. And I'm gonna come back to this thing you talked about earlier about discourse analysis, because I think this is a really fascinating area for internal communicators to put into their armoury to help think about how language and the work that we do can therefore drive outcomes and

decisions in the business that really whether that's a productivity outcome or whether that's an appetite for risk or an ability to innovate or ability just to have relations and conversations that nudge and move things forward. So you talked a little bit earlier about it and this kind of and obviously as internal communicators we have so much access to words and how they're used in a business, if you like, and whether that's in a digital form or a human form. And you talked about it as a qualitative technique. Also, I think discourse is being used currently, that's a way of describing disagreement. But this is a different...

Gill Ereaut (35:29)

You see, that's how language works, you know, it kind of evolves and yeah, exactly,

Jennifer Sproul (35:30)

Is that catch and release? Well, no, actually, no, at the moment. We're talking about it in a whole different context. So can you...I guess talk to me a little bit more, about that research methodology angle on about what does that look like as a qualitative research but also outcome driven decision making process that can be helped to think about how language and communication can drive thinking and outcome or culture.

Gill Ereaut (35:58

If I just do a tiny, potty history of discourse analysis, adds a set of, and a lot of academics would be very unhappy with me saying discourse analysis like it was a single thing, because it isn't a single thing, but leave them outside. It was an approach to language that emerged from the mid-80s onwards in a number of different disciplines, social science disciplines largely. So you have it in psychology, sociology, media studies, history even.

And it essentially takes the view that, as I think I said before, language isn't a transparent medium through which we talk about a fixed reality, but language itself constructs that reality. You know, there is such a thing as a kind of hard, table in front of me and so on, but so much of our world is actually constructed. so language does things, it creates realities. Language is action. So every time you make a choice in how you're going to say something, you are doing something, not just communicating something, bear with me. And what's very interesting also about discourse analysis was it was, it is, was and is, used a lot to look at structures of power, one of the ways in which power is exerted is through the power to name or not name and to normalise and to naturalise. Well, of course it's normal, and we can see it historically, it was at one point completely natural that women should just not go out to work. As soon as they had a baby, they would just stay at home. I mean, that was a natural thing to do, and it was very unnatural for women to not do that. But the idea of naturalising something is a way of holding in place a certain state of affairs. And it's linked,

of course, with power, because any state of affairs has power attached to it. There are people who benefit from that state of affairs and people who don't benefit from it, and so on.

So discourse analysis is a really, really powerful set of tools and it has a lot of different specific analysis tools within it. And by tools I mean frameworks for thinking. I think of it as if you're driving along, normally you're looking through your windscreen. You're just looking at what's out there, where am gonna go? And what discourse analysis allows you to do is to look at the windscreen.

So you're not just looking at, what is somebody saying to you or what are you trying to say to them, but you're looking at the thing through which you're saying it and you're making that visible. So there's a lovely chapter in a book that talks about language not as a window, but as a topic. So language itself, the choices that you're making in language becomes a topic in its own right, quite apart from what's the substantive content to what's being said. And when you guys, I think it will be very, I suspect there'll be lots of your listeners who will be going, yeah, okay, so I can look at the language. You're doing this intuitively anyway. Every time you rewrite or rewrite something, because it doesn't sound quite right or I need it to sound a bit more authoritative or I need it to sound a bit more whatever the brief is or your own brief to yourself. Every time you do that, you are using forms of discourse. You're choosing from within the huge array of language that we have, particularly in English, to choose from to get exactly that nuance right. And what discourse analysis allows you to do is to kind of codify what you're doing. And the trick, of course, and people sometimes get very upset that if you codify writing or language, you kill it. And my experience is you don't kill it. People get very excited at oscillating between the creative production of language and the analysis of language because it opens up another way of seeing what the language is doing. And I have, you know, honestly had clients get very excited about what it unleashes. And in fact, not just the commissioning clients, the senior people, whoever it is.

But by choice, we would normally present the findings of this work to a very large swathe of people from across the organisation at once, two, 300 people in a room ideally. Because there's something about people suddenly seeing something that has been hidden from them, but that makes sense to them, that's very energising. And what you need in change is energy, isn't it? To change anything, you need some kind of poof that's Louin talks about unfreezing, but that's a bit kind of mechanical and I know it's not the best bottle having that kind of sudden realisation that the status quo is not serving any of us very well, no matter what level in the Organisation, the status quo, we do need to change ourselves in order to keep up with customers, in order to whatever it is that we have to do is very...allows a kind of release of energy. So I think it's a very interesting technique. There are semi-quantified approaches within it. I mean, looking at a thing called corpus linguistics, which has a relationship with LLMs, but it's not the same thing at all. But looking at how language is used kind of in real life out there in the wild can be very revealing. You we understand the implication of somebody using a particular word because in the dictionary, well, that's a nice little innocent word, that doesn't mean anything nasty, does it? But when you look at how

it's used in practice out there in the world, you see that in common usage, it doesn't mean that at all. It means something quite unpleasant and so on. That's not a great example, I don't know that answers what you asked me about discourse, Jen.

Jennifer Sproul (41:27)

Yeah, it does and it makes me think of even more things as a tool, as you say, a framework that could really empower the internal communication community because as you say, I think that the work we have is relational as well as conversational, right? And also as well, you talk about change and this whoosh of energy that we need. We know that we're Organisations want people to change and adapt and adopt, which I say at a significant pace. And they can't understand the frustration of why that doesn't happen. Because perhaps they're trying to put, as you said at the very beginning of this podcast, thinking into the old grooves rather than find the new grooves of doing things. And I think that language is sort of kind of amorphized in many ways. And we talk a lot about as internal communicators, the power of listening, right? And obviously from research, is the power of observing as well as that, as well as not intervening on that. And also then understanding the relationship of language between the corporate world or your business or your professional world to your consumer world to your, I'm Jen and I'm your friend and we're a human world, right? And I would certainly say that as you talk out loud and you think about the wild language as in language out in the wild and then language we sound ourselves confined to in the workplace, they feel very different. I wouldn't use workplace language in my wild world. I don't know if that makes any sense, but I hope you're following me.

But I think analyzing the two side by side gives you an understanding of where that gap of humanity is not creating that connection of the dot for a shared meaning and creation of a new groove. And I think that's a really powerful way to think about that. And I would say as internal communicators.

If you're looking at your methodologies, going back to that sort of question of the methodology aspect of discourse analysis, and the phrase you said earlier is data into the world of your culture, maybe, there is an abundance of data out there to us that we can collect and we can mine and we can codify where you take from what's happening in observational circumstances, so you're not enforcing that, to what's happening naturally, to what you're seeing over here to what's happening in the wild to how language has moved forward and how that can be mapped to outcomes that aren't happening. I'm getting over nerdy at the beginning, this is what I'm getting over nerdy and I'm okay with that. So I guess it's kind of if we are if people are listening right now and they're thinking, I'm really worried about this thing and maybe that's a key I could unlock in my practice and the work I'm doing and maybe by doing this I can shed light on some problems that we're not overcoming and some challenges that we're not solving. How do you start that way of what would be a small thing you would say, go away and have a think about this and that might unearth something super powerful that you can help shed light to as a business that can move it forward.

Gill Ereaut (44:39)

There are a number of quite sort of fertile parts of speech or language features. I mean, I mentioned pronouns before. I would say to somebody like, like have a notebook and just notice anything. Just listen to the language, not what the language is saying. Listen to the language. Where there's choice, there's meaning, always. So where people are choosing to say it this way rather than that way, there's always a kind of reason for that. They may or may not be conscious of it. It doesn't really matter. But that's where culture erupts all the time in those sort of non-conscious choices. So I would say pronouns, like who's the we, who's the they.

Looking at labels, which we touched on before, sometimes people notice, I mean, apocryphally, I think it's an apocryphal tale. There was an American investment bank where a category of customer were routinely referred to as Muppets, the Muppets. We've got a meeting with Muppets this afternoon. Now, you you can absolutely hear the disrespect in that, but that's an extreme. But coming back from there.

There are an awful lot of ways that, for example, customers get talked about or competitors or other groups get talked about, which you might notice, particularly when you're new. I would say to anybody, when you're new in an Organisation, when you're new in a team, perhaps you're, as internal communicators, are working with a new division within an Organisation, keep the notebook. You don't have to work out there and then why it's important or why you've noticed it. Just notice it and write it down because what we're looking for always are patterns.

So pronouns, labels, metaphor, we've touched on metaphor a few times. Extremely powerful. Can you suddenly realize that everybody in this meeting is using sporting metaphors or everybody in this meeting is, we've suddenly started talking about us as a family or XXX and think later, what does that mean? How does that fit in with everything else I know about this Organisation?

There are particular forms of language which again would be quite easy to spot when you kind of get your ear in like parent-child relationships. We worked with one Organisation where the parent-child dynamic was so profound. I mean, you just saw it everywhere. we say we collect a lot of data and we're looking for patterns. They're often like low signal to noise ratio, but in this particular place, the parent-child thing went bing, bing everywhere. So even, I mean, there was a kind of top-down directive voice, but even people at much lower levels, if they were writing an email to colleagues, they would use a parental kind of, you must do this kind of tone. Notices on the walls everywhere were in that kind of finger-wagging parental kind of voice. It's important, you must wash up your clay-town mug. And there were two such notices about the same sink.

You know, individual data points don't do it, but when you start to see that pattern. So parent-child discourse, things like narratives, of course, if there is a pervasive narrative in this Organisation. I've talked in the book about a particular Organisation where there was a narrative. They didn't call her the bad queen, but she was very clearly in that role. She's a past leader who had done something quite profound to the Organisation, the effects of which were still being felt and suffered from. And so, you know, the whole narrative about how she had been the wrongdoer and they were all, you know, suffering the effects. All of these just give you a kind of another way of thinking about what's going on. Another way of making sense of what you're seeing or the tasks you're being that people are struggling to perform, whether it's you or somebody else. What's in the way here? Well, maybe what's in the way is that nobody can get past this narrative and that maybe it's helpful. I would always say it's helpful to see it first and then think collectively about how to change it rather than you kind of pushing in a new narrative. You might have some success doing that, but if you can help the whole Organisation or large numbers of people recognize that that narrative is important, it's being perpetuated, and maybe it's not helpful anymore. Then you open up space for people to, well, often you find people are really happy to say goodbye to it. People who have felt that it's not in their gut, that that's not helpful, but haven't, because it's normal, they haven't been able to break out. So that kind of thing, I guess. Does that help?

Jennifer Sproul (49:20)

Massively, yes, thank you, really helpful, thank you.

Gill Ereaut (49:26)

I mean, your listeners especially will have the linguistic is and the linguistic ability to be able to think about and categorise some of those things that they hear and as I say, look for patterns. One thing I would always say, which I don't think I have a chance to say, is I feel very strongly that in analysing culture and advising Organisations on culture, this is not a blame game. This is not a finger pointing exercise. To go back to something Dom said earlier, you can get quite toxic people who are just quite unpleasant or out for whatever it is. But most people come to work not wanting to make difficulty for other people. They really do. Most people come to work wanting to be part of the success of the Organisation. I may be bit Pollyanna-ish, but that is how it is. what Organisations get stuck, though because of that process I talked about that the only people are really aware of the culture of the newcomers and they can't comment, et cetera. So if you can hold a mirror up to an Organisation and say, from the way you talk, it looks like this is what's going on. What do you think? And it's no one's fault, by the way, because you all absorbed this. You all became acculturated when you joined. However, if you then can see it and understand it and people still don't do anything about it, then it starts to become a question more of accountability. You know, do understand this now, so let's crack on and do something about it. Obviously, if there's a

senior person who comes in or people who come in and think this is really weird the way we talk about customers around here, or, you know, I really don't like the way we always talk about X, then they can start to intervene and do things. But for most people, that's not an option open to them.

Cat Barnard (51:09)

I just want to chip in. I think now that you've told us, well, I picked this up obviously in the book and I would recommend the book to anybody working in internal communication. It's not a lofty read. You will get through it and your brain will be fizzing with insights and ideas. Now that we've heard this, it's almost impossible, isn't it, to conceive of a place where culture is not shaped by language. Now, I'm going to tell you a little story where I had a big aha moment from reading your book. Those who listen to this podcast will know that I do an awful lot of writing for the IoIC and we've produced a number of reports and white papers and discussion documents and so on. And one of the things that I think I was made aware of early on in my career is that business language differs from the language that we use with our friends in the pub. And actually, having studied French and Italian, I remember being very, very daunted by the prospects of doing business in France and Italy because while I was more than able to pick up the phone and have a conversation, with somebody in either of those two languages, the idea of writing in business French or business Italian was somewhat different. And actually, this is really boring, I think it's the Collins dictionary, the translation dictionaries actually have separate dictionaries for business French, business Italian, right? So when I was reading the book, you made the point, Gill, that business language is heavily influenced by Napoleonic language structure, whereas our vernacular is more influenced by Old English. Now, I don't want to go into Old English because that just gives me Chaucer Willys and that's just giving me the heebie-jeebies, but that really struck a chord for me because it made me think about the way that we write for professional audiences or the way that we write for business audiences. And actually, as I was reading what you had to say in the book, I was thinking about the way in which contracts and legal English is really quite onerous and an acquired taste. You have to have learned to read contracts to be able to skim through them quickly, otherwise they are very, very onerous. And I was saying, so my business partner and I met at university doing the language degree and I was fizzing and saying to Patrick, my God, you know, have to read this book to see it, to believe it. This key point about the difference between colloquial English and business English.

At which point his husband chipped in and said, yeah, no, the whole of the public sector had to rewrite their literature to reflect the language that their inverted commerce service users would be familiar with. And it was just the biggest aha moment for me because I went from thinking this is how we write around here because we're business professionals and therefore sentences need to be structured in this way to a completely different appreciation of who are we writing for and if you then factor in lots of people don't read in the same way

that we would read or appreciate language in the same way that we would appreciate it really does change the game. So, and that was literally like, I, hadn't even occurred to me that the way that business language is structured, A has changed in certain circles to meet the needs of modern audiences and B, I couldn't see the water that I was swimming in. And I think that's really apposite for the change that is upon, thrust continuously upon all of us.

Gill Ereaut (55:50)

There's a whole, we could do another half an hour probably on Anglo-Saxon versus non-conquest language, but it is such a useful thing to understand that, well, I'd say Anglo-Saxon, I don't mean Chauser, I mean, if you think the language of pig, dog, horse, stab, wife, that's Anglo-Saxon and it was a spoken language. I think we're not technically supposed to call it Anglo-Saxon anymore, but that's what we understand. And that was not written down. And then come the Norman conquest, the written language and law to all of the institutions of high status and power, so law, finance, royalty, and so on, were French. And so a lot of our convoluted, our highfalutin language is Latinate, as in not Latin, but Latinate. It's based in old French or whatever.

And we almost always in English have an Anglo-Saxon equivalent. We have a real luxury in English of being able to have these sort of dual vocabularies. And that means that if you want to be clear and for people to immediately understand what you're writing, speak it and write down what you just said and then edit it a bit. Your point is right Cat, that not everybody can deal with more complex language. But even extremely highly educated people, often the busiest people, have the most stuff coming at them. Nobody ever said, I didn't want to read this because it was too easy, because it was too clear. They just don't say that. Even busy, educated people really appreciate material that is clear. And one of the royal roads to clarity is to use simpler Anglo-Saxon based vocabulary where possible. I'll stop ranting because I do rant about this.

Dominic Walters (57:43)

It's a really good rant if rant's the right word. Is rant an Anglo-Saxon word? It sounds like it should be. Look, we talk about this a lot with leaders and about the simplest thing. It's one of the biggest pushbacks that you get from leaders is, hey look, if I use simple language, people will think I don't understand the full complexity. I don't get the difficulty behind this. I'm not clever enough. All that sort of stuff. We get quite a lot of those things. We need to come into land to use a metaphor we use quite a lot and I'm starting to analyse all the phrases that we use on this podcast. But it'd be great if you could cover such fantastic areas. When it comes to internal communication, particularly those going through change, what do you think is one or two things they should be taking from this, other than to read your book, which would be very sage advice. But apart from that, what else should they be doing to start to bring some of your principles to life?

Gill Ereaut (58:33)

Around change in particular, you mean?

Dominic Walters (58:35)

Yeah, around change, well anywhere actually, but let's focus on change.

Gill Ereaut (58:38)

I mean, I think what this, my perspective, the book, et cetera, would allow many of your comms professionals to do is to, as I think I mentioned, sort of codify what you kind of already know. You your instinct will get you, your professional instincts will get you writing, generally speaking, in a clearer way. What understanding the forms of discourse and the implications of discourse will do is to give you a whole set of arguments to have that conversation with that leader who doesn't want you to write like that. It's often the case that the professionals out here know exactly what the audience needs, but there's a kind of, I mentioned before, kind of gravitational pull that comes from the way we've always done it around here, the way I need to present myself as a leader, as a whatever, and the violence done to contemporary communications by 1950s English teachers is legion. Because Mr. Smith said we could never start a sentence with an and or a but, therefore we can't. Well, actually we can. And if you do it, the whole thing, that and other things. So there's a whole area of I think in the book I talk about dialogic, which is a fancy way of just saying conversational language. But importantly, we don't mean text, text speak or slang or anything nasty with emojis, which is mean using the structures of spoken language on the page, because we speak, we construct language in a very different way, including the use of simpler, older vocabulary, but not just that. And when you transfer some of those onto the page, then the thing starts to sing. So I think, I don't know if it's a full answer to question, Dom, but **I would say get conversant with being able to codify and talk about why this is going to help the communication**. And also there is, I think, I'm sure there is evidence, I could probably ask somebody to help find it, that the busier people are. The more educated they are, in a sense, the more important they are, the more they appreciate clarity of writing. There are many, secretaries of state who these days will not read a paper that's longer than a side or two sides. There's too much coming at them. And if you can get your point across on a side or two sides in clear, straightforward language, you'll get read.

Dominic Walters (01:06)

Yeah, yeah, because people are switched off, I guess. We do need to come into land, but that's a great way to do so because it's a fantastic piece of advice. Gill, thank you for a

fascinating conversation. I'm going to be watching not just what I say, but how I say it, looking through the windscreen at it. So if I have a crass in the next few weeks. Thanks a lot, Gill. Thank you.

Gill Ereaut (01:23)

Don't get too self conscious or you'll fall off. Yes, okay.

You're very welcome. Thank you for the invitation. It's been great conversation. Thank you. Bye bye.