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Deconstructing Difference: The Rhetoric of Human Resource Managers’ Diversity Discourses

Patrizia Zanoni and Maddy Janssens

Abstract

This article analyses texts on diversity produced in 25 interviews with Flemish human resource (HR) managers from a critical discourse analysis and rhetorical perspective. Following critical discourse analysis, we analyse how HR managers define diversity, how their diversity discourses reflect existing managerial practices and underlying power relations, and how they reaffirm or challenge those managerial practices and power relations. Specifically, we examine how power enters HR managers’ local discourses of diversity through the very micro-dynamics of language by analysing the rhetorical schemes they use and the grand Discourses they draw from. This critical, text-focused approach to diversity discourses contributes to the development of a non-essentialist reconceptualization of diversity that acknowledges power.

Keywords: diversity, difference, human resource management, discourse, rhetoric, argumentation

Diversity emerged as an autonomous research domain in the 1990s, following practitioners’ growing interest in how to ‘manage’ diversity in organizations. These managerial roots have left their imprint on the first generation of diversity studies, which mainly focus on the effects of diversity in organizations, without questioning the nature of the construct. In recent years, well-known scholars in the field have pointed to these shortcomings and argued that current conceptualizations of diversity lack rigour, theoretical development, and historical specificity (Nkomo and Cox 1996).

This article intends to contribute to a more rigorous and theoretically grounded conceptualization of diversity. In order to do so, we analyse texts on diversity produced in interviews with human resource (HR) managers involved in diversity management by using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) and rhetorical approach. Our analysis is structured along three research questions. How do HR managers rhetorically define diversity? How are HR managers’ rhetorical constructions of diversity a product of existing managerial practices? How do HR managers’ rhetorical constructions of diversity contribute to reaffirming or challenging managerial practices?

These three research questions are informed by CDA, an approach to discourse analysis stressing the connection between language and power by examining how concepts, objects, and subject positions are constituted.
through language and how power relations are exercised in discursive activity (Phillips and Hardy 2002; Van Dijk 2001). While critical discourse analyses of diversity are still exceptions (De los Reyes 2000; Litvin 1997), this approach has proven useful in understanding the way language operates to maintain unequal race (Van Dijk 1993) and gender (Benschop and Doorewaard 1998; Fletcher 1998) relations in organizations. By approaching diversity through CDA, we aim at its critical reconceptualization.

We further use rhetorical theory and method to examine the micro-dynamics of HR managers’ persuasive use of language when talking about diversity (Warnick 2000). Because HR managers not only enforce diversity policies, but also need to persuade different audiences about their appropriateness, they are privileged speakers in the creation of ‘local’ hegemonic discourses of diversity. In our analysis, we accordingly focus on the rhetorical schemes they use to build their argumentations and the grand Discourses they draw from. Before engaging in the analysis, we critically review the current conceptualizations of diversity as found in contemporary texts on diversity, and discuss how critical discourse analysis and rhetoric are conducive to reaching our research objectives.

By combining CDA and rhetorical theory and method, we advance the understanding of the micro-dynamics of language use in HR managers’ hegemonic discourses of diversity. This approach contributes to the development of a de-essentialized notion of diversity that acknowledges power.

Contemporary Texts of Diversity

While there is a growing critical literature examining how power informs discourses of gender or race in organizations (Benschop and Doorewaard 1998; Fletcher 1998; Trethewey 1999; Van Dijk 1993), critical studies of diversity are today still the exception (De los Reyes 2000; Liff and Wajcman 1996; Litvin 1997). In this section, we review the definitions of diversity as found in three types of texts within the mainstream literature: practitioners’ articles and books on diversity management, chapters on diversity in organizational behaviour handbooks, and academic articles researching the effects of diversity in organizations. We examine how each type of text conceptualizes diversity by identifying its main features and implicit assumptions.

Texts for a practitioner public (for example, Cox and Blake 1991; Thomas 1991) mainly portray the ‘business case’ of diversity. They discuss the potential economic benefits of a diverse workforce and present best practices that help organizations to realize them. For instance, it is argued that a diverse workforce brings multiple perspectives in the organization, leading to innovation and qualitative problem solving (Cox and Blake 1991). Because of its managerial approach, these texts relate diversity to specific individual competences considered instrumental to the attainment of organizational goals. Further, to limit potential resistance from dominant groups, these texts define diversity broadly, by including, next to classical diversity axes such as
race, gender and disability, others such as age, corporate background, education, and personality (Thomas 1991). In this way, every employee can be seen as ‘different’, and diversity is reinscribed within a classical meritocratic organizational discourse, attributing to individuals the responsibility to grasp opportunities (Liff and Wajcman 1996). This conceptualization hides power in diversity by representing organizations as arenas where differences and competences are valued and individuals receive the same opportunities.

The second type of text consists of chapters on diversity in handbooks of organizational behaviour. Different from the texts for practitioners, these texts define diversity in a narrow way on the basis of ‘primary’ demographic characteristics such as gender and race. They then construct diversity as a group phenomenon of employees belonging to the same category. This narrow, group definition is based on the assumption that these demographic characteristics are constitutive of human beings’ essences (Moorhead and Griffin 1995), and contributes to their further representation as unchanging and unchangeable (De los Reyes 2000). This perspective hides power by naturalizing diversity as a group’s universal, fixed essence.

Academic articles empirically researching the effects of diversity form the third type of texts on diversity. Similar to the diversity chapters in handbooks, these texts tend to define diversity in a narrow way, mainly in terms of gender and race, and look at it as a group phenomenon. They use demographic characteristics as independent variables and investigate their effect on either discriminatory practices such as the glass ceiling, wage differences, segregation, and exclusion from informal networks (Cox and Nkomo 1990; Ibarra 1995) or work-related outcomes such as innovation, quality, and problem solving (Milliken and Martins 1996). In both cases, the assumption is that the demographic category under investigation reflects essential differences in attitude, personality, and behaviour. However, these two types of studies deal differently with power in diversity. Studies examining work-related outcomes ignore power relations through an instrumental approach to diversity. Studies examining discriminatory practices, on the contrary, acknowledge unequal power relations, but explain them solely in individual psychological terms or as effects of interpersonal dynamics between individuals, such as mentoring relationships (Ragins and Scandura 1994), ‘homophily’ (Ibarra 1995), or distinctiveness (Mehra et al. 1998).

There are thus a few fundamental differences in the conceptualization of diversity within the mainstream literature. The three types of texts define diversity as an individual or a group phenomenon, broadly or narrowly. Furthermore, they differ in the degree to which they instrumentally relate diversity to organizational goals and in the extent to which they treat it as a given essence. Despite these various emphases, these texts all assume that diversity is a universal and objective fact that can be described, measured, and used. They all postulate that diversity is a reality in current organizations rather than conceiving it as a social construction reflecting existing power relations. In this article, we assume that diversity is a discourse, socially constructed through language and embedded in power relations. In order to understand how power enters diversity discourses, we now turn to CDA and rhetoric.
Critical Discourse Analysis and Rhetoric

Discourse analysis studies how discourses produced in texts construct social reality. It assumes that language does not reveal or reflect a pre-existing reality, but, rather, constitutes it, and aims at ascertaining how this occurs through a systematic study of various types of texts (Phillips and Hardy 2002). The texts under study are interview texts in which HR managers construct diversity. To analyse them, we draw from two traditions: critical discourse analysis, which focuses on the role of discourse activity in constituting and sustaining unequal power relations (Fairclough and Wodak 1997), and rhetoric, which focuses on speakers’ persuasive use of language (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969). Starting with critical discourse analysis, we present our approach to both traditions and relate it to our three research questions.

Diversity from a Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective

Within the discourse analysis tradition, CDA focuses on the role of discursive activity in constituting and sustaining unequal power relations (Phillips and Hardy 2002). It studies the ways texts in social and political contexts enact, reproduce, and resist social power abuse, dominance, and inequality (Van Dijk 2001). Like other critical theory approaches, it assumes that power is not always exerted through obviously abusive acts of domination, but rather more pervasively through hegemony, that is, by securing consent on laws, rules, norms, and habits that reflect unequal power relations (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). To analyse how power operates through language in discourses on diversity, we approach the texts of the HR managers’ interviews from three interrelated perspectives: as discursive practices, as products of social practices, and as producers of social practices (Fairclough 1992).

Approaching texts as ‘discursive practices’, we look at the power inherent in the very constitution of concepts, objects, and subject positions. By talking of diversity, HR managers reaffirm their right to speak and construct diversity in ways that are functional to maintaining this privileged right at the expense of other organizational actors. Accordingly, our first research question examines how HR managers define diversity. We analyse how, from their privileged position, they represent ‘diverse’ employees and discuss the discursive implications of these representations.

The local diversity discourses are realized by means of texts; however, they are more than texts. They also reflect the structures and practices that underlie those texts and their production (Fairclough 1992). Discourses are therefore the ‘product of social practices’ and must be understood in their social context. Hence, our second research question addresses the ways in which the diversity discourses are constructed in the functioning of existing management practices structured along power relations. Through this perspective, we can understand how existing power relations are reflected in the discursive construction of diversity.

Lastly, discourses are not only the product of social practices, but also the producer thereof. It is through the constitution and deployment of particular
discourses that actors secure their (privileged) right to speak and maintain or challenge existing power relations (Phillips and Hardy 1997). Consequently, our third research question explores the ways in which diversity discourses contribute to reaffirming or challenging existing management practices and underlying power relations.

While CDA allows us to understand how diversity shapes and is shaped by managerial practices and their underlying power relations, it does not provide specific instruments to analyse the micro-dynamics of concrete texts (Phillips and Hardy 2002). We therefore turn to rhetoric, as a complementary theory and as a method, to operationalize our analysis.

**Rhetorical Analysis**

While different approaches to rhetoric have been used in organizational studies (Keenoy 1990; Watson 1995), we understand the term as ‘the art of persuasion through argumentation’ (Warnick 2000). Conceived in this classical sense, rhetoric can make a double contribution to our study. At a theoretical level, rhetoric helps us to gain a better understanding of how hegemonic power operates by focusing on speakers’ argumentative use of language to persuade others and to build a real or hypothetical audience consensus (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969; Warnick and Kline 1992).

At the methodological level, rhetoric provides a comprehensive set of tools to analyse texts systematically. Through rhetorical analysis, we can therefore examine the micro-dynamics of HR managers’ discourses of diversity while paying special attention to their persuasive function.

Rhetoric assumes a dialectical relationship between the speaker as an active and creative ‘maker’ of discourse and the audience she or he addresses (Gill and Whedbee 1997). This relationship is mediated by the discursive context, which speaker and audience share. This context is composed of taken-for-granted grand Discourses on which a broad consensus exists, and which can be used to legitimize the speaker’s own argumentations. In this perspective, the text becomes a locus where the subject produces a local, unique discourse (what Fairclough (1992) calls a ‘discursive event’) by (1) drawing from shared, pre-existing, culturally and historically situated grand Discourses in an intertextual way (Fairclough 1989) and (2) selecting certain rhetorical schemes or frames minimally connecting ideas or terms in a sketchy to-be-filled-in manner (Warnick 2000). In order to be persuasive, the speaker needs to select grand Discourses and rhetorical schemes that are familiar to the audience, since argumentations derive their persuasiveness from their recognizability (Warnick and Kline 1992). At the same time, however, through the selection of recognizable rhetorical schemes and grand Discourses, the speaker’s discourse contributes to their further naturalization into hegemonic ‘common sense’.

Relating rhetoric to our three research questions, we consequently focus on the rhetorical schemes and grand Discourses that HR managers select when talking about diversity. To analyse systematically their language use, we rely on the classification of rhetorical schemes devised by Perelman and
Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric* (1969), which we present in the method section.

**Methodology**

**The Study**

The text analysis is based on 25 interviews with HR managers in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium, conducted between January and June 2001. All interviewees are members of the ‘diversity management’ workgroup of a major employer association. We selected these HR managers for three reasons: they represent organizations well known for their diversity policies; they are responsible for implementing the policy; and the workgroup they belong to is one of the main local venues for sharing information on diversity management. So, in their role as HR managers, they need to argue with and persuade different audiences of the appropriateness of their policies.

At the time of the interviews, the notion of diversity was entering governmental and corporate Discourses on employment. Traditionally, ‘diverse’ employees were defined as ‘underprivileged’, referring to their weak position on the labour market and in society. However, the shortage of labour during the positive economic cycle of 1999–2001 stimulated the emergence of a new employment Discourse. Unemployed individuals were considered untapped labour potential that needed to be ‘activated’ to produce economic value.

The interviews were conducted jointly by a member of the employers’ association and the first author. They took place at the interviewees’ workplace, lasted one to three hours, and were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The interview was guided by a questionnaire of 20 wide-ranging, open questions. Topics included (1) the definition of ‘diversity’ (What do you understand by diversity? How did you learn about diversity?); (2) practices of diversity (Which activities regarding diversity are in place? Who initiated them?); (3) the goals of the diversity policy (What are the objectives? How do you evaluate the policy?); and (4) the link between diversity and organizational goals (Does your diversity policy address a particular organizational need?).

**Data Analysis**

The texts were first coded in terms of content, identifying diversity dimensions such as gender, age, ethnicity, and disability. This step was done separately by each co-author. We then jointly selected excerpts that contained a developed argumentation of diversity. In a third step, we identified the rhetorical schemes and the grand Discourses. In order to be as ‘faithful’ as possible to the original texts, the analysis was carried out on the original Flemish version. The excerpts presented in the result section were translated so that the rhetorical schemes could remain as intact as possible. For instance, we have kept the ‘dialectical use of question and answer’, common in Flemish
Dutch, because it is a specific rhetorical scheme (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 109).

We present here the rhetorical schemes that interviewees most commonly used. (For a more elaborated discussion, see Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969; Warnick 2000.) These schemes belong to two main categories: the starting points of arguments and the rhetorical schemes further developing the arguments. The starting points of arguments refer to the premises that are held by the speaker to be already accepted by the audience. They can be divided into two major types: premises that focus on the real (facts, truths, and presumptions) and premises that focus on the preferable (values, hierarchies, and the loci of quantity, quality, and essence) (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969). The rhetorical schemes that further develop an argument are of three different types: quasi-logical schemes, schemes based on the structure of reality, and schemes establishing the structure of reality (Warnick 2000).

Quasi-logical arguments claim validity through their rational appearance and their similarity to logical formulae. They include the rhetorical schemes of (1) reciprocity and the rule of justice, that is, justifying, respectively, the same treatment to two situations which are counterparts of each other and arguing for the identical treatment of beings or situations of the same kind; (2) transitivity, that is, establishing a relation between a and c through a relation between a and b and one between b and c; and (3) comparison, that is, first relating different terms and then comparing them with each other.

Rhetorical schemes based on the structure of reality aim at establishing solidarity between accepted judgements and others which one wants to promote. This type of scheme includes (1) liaisons of succession uniting a phenomenon to its causes or consequences; (2) liaisons of coexistence establishing a relationship between an observable fact (the manifestation) and what is not observable (the essence); (3) double hierarchies correlating a contested hierarchy with an accepted one; and (4) differences of degree (of intensity) versus differences of order (of nature), that is, bringing compared terms closer to each other or moving them further apart.

The third type of rhetorical scheme aims to establish a new reality through particular cases. These schemes refer to (1) examples implying disagreement with a particular rule and aiming to establish another principle; (2) illustrations adhering to rules by providing particular clarifying instances; and (3) models and anti-models intending to encourage and discourage behaviour.

Diversity as a Group's Essence

In this section, we address our first research question on how HR managers rhetorically define diversity. We identify the most commonly used rhetorical schemes and conclude with the implications of these definitions on the discursive representation of diverse employees.

HR managers usually start defining diversity by listing the socio-demographic characteristics (such as ethnicity or culture, gender, (dis)ability,
age, and education) of a hypothetical individual employee. However, as the discussion advances and diversity is placed within the specific organizational context, these attributes are increasingly ascribed to a group. The diverse employee is no longer constructed as an individual, but rather solely as the member of a group that she or he represents. Rhetorically, the identification of an individual with a larger group is established through a liaison of coexistence, whereby the member stands in relation to the group as the manifestation of a phenomenon stands in relation to its essence (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 322). The following excerpt well illustrates the individual–group relationship:

‘In the past we set Els to work, she came through school, an internship and afterwards she was hired with an open-ended contract. And there were already a few [disabled people] at work from the past, very loyal people. My experience is: they do not make mistakes easily, you have to restrict them, organize them well, very loyal, very good workers. In the beginning, their rhythm is somewhat slower, but once they know their job well, it goes very well.’

The essential link between the individual and the group is taken for granted to the point that the HR manager omits any explicit passage from the former to the latter. By doing so, Els becomes an undifferentiated part of the group of the disabled. She is not evaluated individually, but rather as the member of a group of loyal, accurate workers.

In the next fragment, this group dimension is reinforced through an opposition and comparison of ‘us’ and ‘them’:

‘Another concern is... it has to do with their culture. We are moving people. We keep high tempos. We are enthusiastic workers... But there are a lot of people who are calmer and less moving, who have a totally different rhythm. It wouldn’t surprise me that in our selection tests, these people [migrants] give, let’s say, 4 or 8 answers while a candidate from our culture answers 25 questions. This affects the score.’

Here, the HR manager of a bank uses another type of liaison of coexistence to define migrant workers. Their slower working pace is seen as a manifestation of their culture, which rhetorically functions as their essence. The discursive effect is one of essentialization: the Flemish work quickly, the migrants work slowly. At the same time, diversity is constructed as a comparison between groups, where cultural difference is a deficiency in relation to an implicitly established norm (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 243). The migrant worker is defined by his or her culture, which is discursively fixed: the lack is irreparable (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 92).

In sum, definitions of diversity are mainly constructed through liaisons of coexistence and comparisons. The use of these two types of schemes in the discursive representation of diverse employees has important power implications. First, a liaison of coexistence is used to construct diverse employees solely as members, and representatives, of reference groups. This rhetorical construction obscures these subjects’ individuality and thus eliminates their agency: they are not full subjects in the modern sense of the word. This liaison of coexistence is further linked to a second liaison of
coexistence portraying the group as a manifestation of given essences, such as disability and culture. Second, through a comparison, different groups are opposed and evaluated in terms of each other. By so doing, a production standard is established in which the dominant group becomes the norm against which all employees are evaluated and diverse employees excluded.

Diversity Discourses as Products of Management Practices

In addressing our second research question on how diversity discourses are produced by existing management practices, we identify two opposite constructions: difference as ‘lack’ and as ‘additional value’. For each construction, we show how different sets of rhetorical schemes and grand Discourses are deployed.

Devaluing Diversity: Difference as Lack

Consistent with various studies pointing to the other’s difference as lack (Westwood 2001; Steyaert and Janssens 2002), our findings indicate that a large group of HR managers tend to judge ‘different’ employees unsuited for a job because they are inferior to an ideal model. Rhetorically, the lack is typically established by starting the argumentation with a fact (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 67), which is then used as a cause leading to certain inevitable consequences through a liaison of succession (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 263). This structure is clearly used in the following excerpt, in which the HR manager of a food company that employs several disabled people defends her decision to remove a disabled worker from a front-line job:

‘Once we had to take somebody out of the sandwich production. This was someone whose handicap was moderate rather than light, and also visible, which is often crucial towards customers. And it was someone with limited capacities, which indeed meant that he could not carry out the job or the required tasks in a qualitative way.’

The argumentation intends to establish the legitimacy of the action by listing ‘facts’: the worker’s moderate mental handicap, visible handicap, and limited capacities. These facts converge in the same direction, strengthening the argumentation (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 471) and allowing the speaker to draw the conclusion that the worker had to be removed from his job. The different facts are also integrated in a double hierarchy: if it is morally questionable that a person be removed from a job because of her or his appearance, it is more acceptable that she or he be removed because she or he is unable properly to carry out the tasks. Through the latter argument, the former is made acceptable (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 337). In its entirety, the excerpt is structured around a failed liaison of succession between a means (the disabled worker) and its end (the production process) (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 272). The HR manager further draws from the grand Discourse of beauty, which she links to three organizational
Discourses: competence, quality, and customer care. In western culture, beauty is — together with truth, the good, and the absolute — a ‘universal’ value that can be used to start an argument and that claims implicit agreement (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 76). In organizations, embodied beauty represents a core competence of front-line employees who need to ‘seduce’ customers to satisfy them: any ‘visible’ difference that might hinder this ‘aesthetic labour’ is considered as lack (Gherardi 1995; Hancock and Tyler 2000).

Within the Belgian multilingual context, another major difference commonly framed as lack is the ‘hearable’ difference. The HR manager of a large, international automotive company in Dutch-speaking Flanders reported his experience with Moroccan workers commuting from a nearby city in French-speaking Wallonia as follows:

‘Regarding knowledge of the language, we have hurt ourselves a bit. We have hired quite a few people who didn’t really have a basic knowledge of Dutch. What does it mean? Our organization is more and more based on teamwork. The division of tasks doesn’t exist any more, so in other words, employees are more and more dependent on one another. And if they depend on one another, they need to be able to communicate. And if they don’t know the language, they can’t communicate and know what the boss or colleague wants. So this is a handicap. Everybody has seen it. Without Dutch, the migrant workers cannot make it happen. You can often solve the problem with French. In the worst cases, we have to put somebody who knows Moroccan next to the person. It’s also part of teamwork. We have solved it this way, but it remains difficult if one doesn’t master the language.’

His argumentation is constructed through a liaison of succession structured in a circular manner. He starts with the ultimate consequence, expressed in an anthropomorphic, metaphorical language: ‘we have hurt ourselves a bit’. He then establishes a list of facts: no basic knowledge of Dutch, teamwork, the interdependence of employees, and necessary communication. These facts, in turn, all lead back to the initial statement of ‘being hurt’. Additional rhetorical schemes are used to strengthen the argumentation. The dialectical use of question and answer secures agreement (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 109). The statement ‘Everybody has seen it’ is a locus of quantity referring to the superiority of what is accepted by the majority (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 86), while the statement on teamwork can be interpreted as a modern locus of the preference for the new over the old typical of managerial Discourses (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 106–107). This discourse mainly draws from grand organizational Discourses of teamwork and competence. As in the previous excerpt, difference is framed as lack in that it hampers highly desirable relationships with relevant others, in this case, colleagues. It is, therefore, no means to reaching the organizational ends.

In sum, discourses of difference as lack are mainly developed through liaisons of succession, a rhetorical scheme based on the structure of reality. Within these liaisons of succession, differences are first established as facts through constructing them in perceptual terms such as ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’. These facts are then related to managerial Discourses of customer care, quality, competence, and teamwork. Since the differences are not functional to the attainment of these organizational ends, the speakers draw the ‘reasonable’
conclusion that diverse employees lack fundamental competences and need to be excluded. Through these rhetorical schemes and grand Discourses, speakers construct local discourses of difference as lack that are based on the evaluation of that difference in terms of its functioning within specific production contexts, rather than in general demographic terms.

Valuing Diversity: Difference as Additional Value

A second cluster of texts constructs difference as a source of additional value for organizations. Differences continue to be evaluated in terms of their effect on the functioning of work processes; however, alternative rhetorical schemes and grand Discourses take the argumentation in a positive direction. In the following fragment, diverse workers are valued as available, flexible, and compliant:

‘[We] had problems in finding employees ... But they [migrant workers] were the only people who still wanted to do the job, and so we said: look, this is how we’ll solve the problem ... Some of the drivers complained about their Dutch but they often said that the Turks and the Moroccans, well, you can ask them to do things you can’t ask our Flemish workers to do. So we have absolutely no complaints about the small group of migrants (there are 10 or 12 of them) ... On the contrary, in some jobs, or working irregular hours and in the rain, they are actually the ones who are an example to the Flemish rather than vice versa.’

This argumentation reverses the dominant stereotype of migrants as ‘difficult’, uncommitted workers, as suggested by referring to the drivers’ complaints and using the word ‘actually’ in the last sentence. It starts with a locus of the unique: the value of workers increases with the difficulty of recruiting them (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 90–91). It is then developed through comparing Flemish and migrant workers (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 242), where the latter assume a model function (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 362). All employees are solely constructed as members of a group, to which a certain work attitude is ascribed. Significantly, culture is not mentioned here, because framing the model behaviour as a manifestation of migrant cultures would be unacceptable in the dominant Flemish cultural context. Elsewhere in the interview, an argument of reciprocity, based on the grand Discourse of fairness, is also introduced: workers’ flexibility is compensated with extra-long holidays, when they visit their countries of origin (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 221). The discourse of diversity as additional value mainly draws on managerial Discourses of flexibility, compliance, and commitment: migrant workers are valued for their willingness to take jobs that require great flexibility, are badly paid, and socially devalued (compare Wright 2001). As a whole, they are portrayed as an effective means to reach organizational ends.

The following fragment presents a positive construction of difference in terms of increased production rhythms:

‘The introduction of women has brought improvements. Let me explain. Fifteen years ago there were no women working in our electronics unit. And then the first arrived
after Philips closed down. And then we thought, look, they did assembly there, they will probably be able to do the assembly here, even though we have no large series. And it was clear that they worked fast. They were used to a high tempo because of the large series they had to do at Philips. And they have shown here that it is possible and they have actually given an extra stimulus; I think they even influenced our way of working.’

This text illustrates an example that justifies the speaker’s initial statement (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 350). The example is developed through a list of chronologically linked facts that present evidence (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 121): there were no women; the first arrived after Philips closed; and women brought improvement. The female workers are clearly constructed as an undifferentiated group (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 322), objectified through the eightfold repetition of the pronoun ‘they’ (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 174–175), and implicitly compared to an unspecified ‘we’ that refers to men or managers (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 243). In order to construct the group positively, the HR manager draws from managerial Discourses of productivity and work pace. Again, these workers are presented as a means to reach an organizational end. However, in contrast to the migrant workers above, the women’s agency is here completely erased. The additional value of their high tempo derives from the physical endurance they have gained through their previous work, rather than their skills and commitment.

In sum, discourses on differences as additional value are mainly developed through examples and models — rhetorical schemes establishing a new structure of reality. The particular cases of migrants and women suggest an alternative reality, which is further validated by using comparisons and arguments of reciprocity, that is, quasi-logical schemes that imitate formal reasoning. To reverse dominant stereotypes regarding these groups, the HR managers draw from managerial Discourses of economic rationality. Diverse employees bring additional value to the organization because of their ‘temporal compliance’: their flexible availability, loyalty, and work pace. These rhetorical constructions are inevitably highly selective and instrumental: diverse employees are reduced to compliant, flexible workers perfectly fitting the hegemonic economic Discourse. They are positively constructed only in as far as they are a means of reaching specific organizational ends.

**Diversity Discourses as Producers of Management Practices**

Diversity discourses are not only produced by existing management practices, they may also operate as producers of practices. In this section, we address our third research question on how diversity discourses reaffirm or challenge management practices and the underlying power relations. We identify two somewhat different diversity discourses producing management practices: the first clearly deploys diversity in order to reaffirm traditional, class power relations between management and employees and the second deploys diversity primarily to challenge power relations among different groups of employees.
Several texts indicate how diversity can be used by managers to manage the labour force and thus reinforce class relations. The HR manager of a beer factory does so by comparing different groups of workers:

‘In 95–96 we had a problem with a production task, which was very stupid and simple, the boxing of four bottles with cardboard. Because of the variety of our bottles and crates that we have, we could not standardize and automate it, so we had to do it manually. This work was outsourced to temporary workers, temporary workers who year by year became a more ‘difficult’ population. The good temporary workers were regularly picked out by us and also by other companies who contracted them. We therefore got an increasing concentration of negativists, who had a problem with the fact that a company is an organization. Back then the company was downsizing. A negative climate prevailed, we also had strikes, and the productivity of the temporary workers, around ten people, went down. And we became less and less competitive. Either we had to stop — but the market suggested the contrary — or we had to do something with those temporary workers, who were so negative and relatively poorly educated, and that was a mess. And then I came in contact with a sheltered workshop, and they said that they really needed jobs for people who are only slightly disabled and who could function perfectly in a family or private company. “We actually have too many people here that could work in the private sector. Can you help us to set them to work?” And then we started a partnership with this sheltered workshop ... so some of their people came to work here. There was actually no problem with social acceptance. All the problems we had with temporary workers like vandalism in the toilets and smoking where it was forbidden were gone.’

The speaker constructs a diversity discourse through an example set in a story format (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 350). The persuasiveness of his words relies both upon his authoritative position (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 181) and the use of a wide variety of rhetorical schemes. The narrative is built on a series of ‘facts’ (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 116) linked in cause–effect liaisons of succession (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 263), while the argumentation is built upon a double comparison of groups of workers: regular versus temporary workers and able versus disabled ones. First, regular workers are judged better than temporary ones using the locus of quantity favouring stability over temporariness (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 86). An argument of waste, condemning the temporary workers for missing the opportunity of being contracted, is used to reinforce this judgement (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 279). In the second comparison, the disabled workers are seen as less troublesome than the able ones. The two comparisons are linked through an implicit heterogeneous hierarchy where compliance is preferred to intellectual skills (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 81) and thus disabled workers substitute temporary ones. Furthermore, the speaker draws on grand Discourses of compliance and work ethics. As in previous excerpts, the disabled workers are valued because they are the most efficient means to reach organizational ends. However, in this case, diversity discourse is clearly deployed to legitimize and enact classical class relations: the management expels resistant temporary workers and substitutes them with disabled, cheaper, and more docile employees.
Diversity can also be used to manage the labour force in a more subtle, dynamic, and relational way:

‘In general I’ve noticed that you have more problems with men. If they are alone? Yes, I have more problems ... I cannot speak in percentages, but you notice that men come to the HR unit with small complaints more often than women. Men come ask for other shifts more often ... And they do this less when there are some women in their environment. If you have a totally male environment, then men behave like ... let me say, in a bit of a sexist way, they behave more “feminine”. They, as we stereotypically think of women, make big problems out of small things. They feel sick and then you say sometimes: are you a man or not? When a number of women are around, then they let that come out much less, because if that woman should ask “Are you a ... ?” It happens. You see that the men are somewhat calmer because there are a few women. They want to behave more as machos. And this can be positive because they tend less to raise small problems. On the other hand, we have to be honest and say that every now and then we have a problem with a man or a woman and that you say, there is something going on there, above all in the sense of sexual harassment. We recently had two cases.’

In this case, the HR manager draws on the established gender Discourse to illustrate how female workers can discipline male workers on the shop floor. Rhetorically, the example is built on liaisons of coexistence arranged in a chain of liaisons of succession (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 350). Although individuals are exclusively constructed as members of the gender group they belong to (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 322), the sex of each group (its essence) and its behaviour (the manifestation) are dissociated and their relation inverted, so that men become ‘feminine’ and women ‘masculine’. This excerpt is particularly interesting because it points to the power dimension of both gender and class relations. Initially, management labels male workers ‘feminine’ to indicate their subordinate position. The female workers later activate male workers’ ‘maleness’, which shifts their attention away from class difference (workers and managers) toward gender (men and women). This allegedly enhances their compliance toward management, but also stimulates more ‘masculine’ behaviour, that is, sexual harassment.

In sum, these diversity discourses reaffirm management practices and the underlying class power relations through comparing different groups and using rhetorical schemes based on the structure of reality: liaisons of coexistence, liaisons of succession, and hierarchies. They draw on managerial Discourses of compliance and work ethic and the Discourse of gender to construct diversity relationally between groups of employees, and by so doing use diversity to legitimate and reproduce existing power relations between managers and employees.

Diversity Discourses Challenging Intergroup Practices

Throughout our interviews, we encountered only two ‘alternative’ discourses of diversity. However, rather than challenging management practices, these discourses challenge existing intergroup practices.

This first excerpt describes a diversity initiative in an educational institution:
‘We want to learn about cultures. How does a Belgian best learn about a culture? By eating. I’m serious. Either travelling or eating. And that is one of the strategies; we consciously chose to give all staff training in the afternoon about Morocco and Turkey. They get to know the culture through nice activities. We had the henna hand painting, clothing rituals, and the position of women. They could also ask all kinds of questions and the Moroccan staff answered them. The afternoon was also organized by the Moroccan staff, the Turkish afternoon by the Turkish staff, who had spread the news in their network to get it done. It was a success! Really! That’s one of the strategies.’

This argumentation is constructed upon an illustration (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 357) structured around three liaisons of coexistence: the member is the manifestation of the group (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 321) and the food and the rituals are manifestations of the person (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 293) and of the culture (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 196: 327). The speaker first establishes a fact (‘We want to learn about cultures’) and then presents his policy as the means of reaching this end (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 272). By drawing on the grand Discourse of culture, the HR manager avoids constructing difference solely as a function of core organizational goals. Instead, the stress on ‘learning’ gives Turkish and Moroccan employees some space to co-construct the cultural discourse on their own terms. Through constructing difference at the margin of the organization, different cultural groups need not be compared and can be valued for their uniqueness (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 77). The rhetorical power of the argumentation lies in the stress the speaker puts on the concrete, embodied cultural manifestations, which can be reconciled more easily than abstract values (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 79). It is not uncommon rhetorically to use physical proximity to indicate closeness between ‘different’ people. As two other interviewees stated: ‘They were completely integrated, they sat together at the table’ and ‘It can work, you have to invest in it. You also see it at personnel parties. They don’t sit on their own.’

In the second fragment, the HR manager of a zoo constructs diversity as individual differences. She attempts to integrate diversity in the organization by negotiating acceptable degrees of difference and sameness. To do so, she uses a difference of degree instead of a difference of order, which brings the terms closer to each other rather than moving them further apart (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 345). For instance, employees are in principle allowed to have tattoos, dreadlocks, and piercings, but they cannot be completely covered with tattoos, dreadlocks should be tied when giving tours to visitors, and piercing is allowed as long as it is safe. While ‘aesthetic’ standards are generally justified with reference to customers, personnel can also play a role in imposing them:

‘For instance, I have people here that look really good and others that are really ugly, thin and fat, small and tall. And if they are women, then they [the workers] are even stricter. I noticed it myself. There was one lady who was quite overweight and she came in contact with a lot of visitors. And the other workers said: “No way that lady should have that job.” So I said: “Oh no, but then we also have to give another job to
the overweight men who come in contact with visitors.” And then they said: “OK, we’re wrong.”

This HR manager challenges employees’ gender discourses of appropriate appearance. She uses an example and the quasi-logical rhetorical scheme of the rule of justice: both men and women are employees, and should be treated the same (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 218). Instead of comparing men and women and establishing a hierarchy between them, she structures her reasoning transitively: if visitors can be guided by overweight men, and overweight men are equal to overweight women, then visitors can be guided by overweight women (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 227). Her discourse draws on the grand Discourse of equality and opposes it to Discourses of beauty and normality.

In sum, these diversity discourses mainly stress and value uniqueness and its concrete manifestations: food and rituals, tattooed bodies, and Rastafarian hair. This very contextual approach to difference reminds us of the feminist ‘ethics of care’ based on concrete relationships as opposed to the ‘ethics of justice’ based on abstract rules (Gilligan 1982). The HR managers further draw on Discourses of culture and equality to construct diversity outside dominant economic Discourse. By doing so, their discourses are less instrumental, although positive social relations between groups might contribute to better organizational results. While these diversity discourses contribute to challenging existing intergroup practices, they do not call existing management practices into question. On the contrary, by solely constructing diversity as a matter of intergroup practices, it implicitly positively portrays (diversity) management practices and stresses the difference between management and employees.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to contribute to the development of a critical, non-essentialist conceptualization of diversity. We have attempted to do so in two ways. First, through CDA, we examined HR managers’ definitions of diversity and their diversity discourses as products and producers of management practices structured along existing power relations. Second, by focusing on rhetorical schemes and grand Discourses, we analysed how power enters HR managers’ local discourses of diversity through the very micro-dynamics of language. In this concluding section, we focus on our main findings with respect to both types of contribution.

HR managers generally define diversity on the basis of a few selected diversity axes and as a group phenomenon. These definitions fix diverse employees’ representations by constructing them solely as members of reference groups sharing given essences, such as disability, gender, or culture. Through this type of representation, diverse employees are discursively denied full subjectivity and agency. As managers, our speakers are, however, not interested in the demographic difference per se, but rather in how that
difference can or cannot be used to attain organizational goals. In the former case, they construct difference positively as additional value; in the latter, they construct it negatively as lack. In both cases, diversity is conceived in a very selective and instrumental way with reference to the productive process in the specific organizational context. In this way, these diversity discourses clearly reflect existing power relations between management and employees in the organization. At the same time, diversity discourses are also actively deployed to reaffirm those class relations. Specifically, managers do so by comparing different groups of employees and using the more compliant or productive group as the norm against which all employees are evaluated. Although two diversity discourses challenged practices between groups of employees, we did not find any discourse challenging managerial practices and the underlying power relations.

Power further enters HR managers’ local discourses of diversity through the micro-dynamics of language. Diversity discourses both reflect and reaffirm existing management practices because HR managers draw heavily from grand Discourses of economic rationality in terms of organizational needs (customer care, quality, competence, and teamwork) and compliance (availability, loyalty, and work pace). By so doing, they not only draw their own legitimacy from these grand Discourses, but also contribute to reaffirming them as hegemonic. In two instances, HR managers relied on the grand social Discourses of culture and equality. However, these discourses of diversity failed to question existing power relations because they promoted equality only between different groups of employees rather than between employees and management.

With respect to the rhetorical schemes used, group-member and essence-group liaisons of coexistence appeared in representations of diverse employees, thereby denying their agency. Rhetorical schemes based on the structure of reality, such as liaisons of coexistence, liaisons of succession, and hierarchies, were the most common throughout the texts. Because these schemes promote the existing reality, they are particularly used in discourses of difference as lack and in those reaffirming managerial practices. In contrast, rhetorical schemes aiming to establish a new reality, such as examples, illustrations and models, were used in only two types of diversity discourse: discourses of difference as additional value and those challenging intergroup practices. However, in both cases, they failed to question existing management practices because they reinscribed diversity within organizational grand Discourses or did not address the management—employees relationship.

As a final reflection, we point to two main limitations of this study. First, we only analysed texts produced by managers. This does not allow for investigation of whether and how employees co-construct an organization’s discourses of diversity, resist objectification, and affirm themselves as agents. Future research may benefit from a more dialogical approach to diversity discourse. Second, the findings of the study reflect our methodological choice to analyse diversity discourses across organizations. A more in-depth analysis of one organization may offer additional insights into the mutual relationship between discursive and other management practices. Ethnographies can
elucidate the non-discursive ways in which diversity practices reinforce or challenge power relations. If diversity research is to overcome the limits of its managerial roots and promote practices that truly value differences within equality, it will need to address critically the role of power in the construction of difference and its managerial use.

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