Voices and silences: the problem of access to embeddedness

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Abstract

The economic geography literature invokes a broad range of socio-cultural factors in explaining the performance of economic actors. The Polanyian–Granovetterian notion of embeddedness is among those often used in this context. This paper discusses epistemological problems involved in doing empirical research on the embeddedness of business firms in the local context. The obvious group of actors addressed in such studies are corporate managers. They can be depicted as agents who derive their power from the corporate resources that they control as well as from the social capital that they gain through their connectedness to a range of social relations.

Interviews between academic researchers and corporate managers are viewed as Bakhtinian dialogues. They are analysed in terms of voice and silence, multivoicedness, social language and speech genre. Voices represent managerial elites in their different roles as well as the social relationships in which they are involved. They are resonated in managers' utterances in interview dialogues. What is not expressed at all or is expressed unclearly or inadequately is captured by the metaphor of silence. Managers' embeddedness in multiple sets of social relations results in multivoicedness, which leads to the need for the researcher to try to identify the different voices and their social origins.

The paper elaborates on the complexities involved in carrying out empirical research on embeddedness. It can also be read as a warning against pursuing such an endeavour without careful conceptual elaboration on the very notion of embeddedness. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction: behind the scene

Recent economic geography literature invokes an increasingly broad range of socio-cultural factors in explaining the performance of economic actors (see, e.g., Dicken and Thrift, 1992; Martin, 1994; Storper, 1997; Lee and Wills, 1997). The Polanyian–Granovetterian 'embeddedness' is among the popular notions used in this context. In recent years, the publishing industry has produced a number of articles and books in which the notion of embeddedness has appeared, sometimes in a central role in the geographical literature (see e.g., Amin and Thrift, 1994; Asheim, 1995; Dicken et al., 1994; Dicken and Thrift, 1992; Harrison, 1992; Hudson, 1994; Markusen, 1994; Martin, 1994; Park, 1996; Park and Markusen, 1995; Phelps et al., 1998; Saxenian, 1994; Turok, 1993; Tödtling, 1994; and elsewhere, e.g., Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Uzzi, 1996, 1997; Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990).

This paper discusses problems related to doing empirical research inspired by the idea that economic action is "embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations" (Granovetter, 1985, p. 487). This idea is approached from the point of view of business firms and their local context. This perspective gives rise to the question: "How does the 'embeddedness' of business firms affect their performance and/or their operation in relation to their local environments?" (This question basically adds the notion of embeddedness to the 'geography of enterprise' tradition, as understood by authors such as McNee, 1960; Dicken, 1990; Taylor, 1995.) This paper raises epistemological issues related to providing answers to this question. Such research involves 'soft' items that escape quantitative measurement and need to be approached qualitatively (Oinas, 1997). It is possible to think of various possible types of research design with which to approach this theme, such as postal questionnaires or participant observation among various employee groups. The focus in this article, however, is on *interviewing* one of the obvious groups of informants: *top managers*, i.e., corporate 'gatekeepers'.

Geographers have a relatively weak record in researching economic development at the level of firms and in investigations on intra-firm processes (Dicken, 1990; Dicken and Thrift, 1992; Taylor, 1995). There

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seems to have been even less interest in interviewing managers as a means to get at those processes. More interest is gradually emerging, however (see, Clark, 1997; Healey and Rawlinson, 1993; Schoenberger, 1991, 1994, 1997; Markusen, 1994). Schoenberger (1994, 1997) has recently powerfully argued that in order to understand corporate operation it would make a great deal of sense to try to understand the identities of corporate managers. As she puts it,

> in order to understand corporate strategies, we need to understand something about corporate strategists. Specifically, we need to consider what shapes their interpretations of the world and their ability to act in it. (Schoenberger, 1997, p. 150)

This paper is largely about interpreting and elaborating on this plea. First, "what shapes their interpretations of the world" is analysed in terms of *embeddedness*. Secondly, "their ability to act in it" is analysed in terms of the *social capital* managerial elites can draw from their embeddedness. Thirdly, the possibility of finding out about their embeddedness, based on their own accounts in interview situations, is discussed by elaborating on the metaphor of *voice* – as inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's work – as well as on the opposite of voice: *silence*.

Before I go out to the field of executive offices, I try to look back to my earlier interviews with managerial elites, which indeed focused on 'simpler' themes than embeddedness, and I try to get prepared. Please, enter my disorderly university office, permeated by academic jargon, from where I can see the down-town corporate quarters from a considerable distance; join me behind the scenes, before the performance. I will be imagining interviews, imagining interviewees: thinking of the issues involved in finding out about the relationship between 'embeddedness' and corporate strategies. (I refer to the interviewee as a 'he' and to the interviewer as a 'she'; that is the way it has been in my own case.)

2. Managerial elites and their embeddedness

2.1. Control of resources

When we think of elites, we think of the various types of individuals that are somehow 'above the rest of us'. As Mills (1959, p. 3) put it in his *The Power Elite*:

> As the means of information and of power are centralized, some men come to occupy positions in [...] society from which they can look down upon, so to speak, and by their decisions mightily affect, the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women. They are not made by their jobs; they set up and break down jobs for thousands of others [...]. They need

not merely 'meet the demands of the day and hour'; in some part, they create these demands, and cause others to meet them. (Mills, 1959, p. 3)

An elite status can be regarded as stemming from the control of resources. Along that line, Etzioni-Halevi (1993, 1994) defines elites as "those people who have an inordinate share of power, on the basis of their active control of resources". This will also be the basis of our discussion of managerial elites in what follows. *Managerial elites are regarded as agents who derive their power from the corporate resources that they control.* "They are not the owners of the corporate properties, and yet they run the corporate show" (Mills, 1959, p. 119).

2.2. Connectedness

Even though corporate managers do not own the corporate resources which grant them their elite status, they have other resources which can be regarded as an essential characteristic of their elite position, namely, the extent of their social and personal networks. Elites can be characterised by their involvement with a broad array of social relations.

> [T]hey are not confined by simple [sic!] family responsibilities; they can escape. They may live in many hotels and houses, but they are bound by no one community (Mills 1959, p. 3).

Whether belonging to management elites is based on the characteristics of individuals, or on inherited corporate wealth, these elites' control of resources makes them wanted: if they are not socially active as individuals, they are made that way because of their elite status. As a consequence, they are involved in many, and possibly seemingly disparate, sets of social relations. As an anecdote, a top executive is reported telling the following:

> Eight years ago I came into sports, and I wanted to separate that world from that of McKinsey. In the sports world I was called Wouter. It worked really good. Many people never made the connection. As the chairman of NOC*NSF I once met the mayor of Nieuwegein and he said: God how funny, I know your brother Mickey very well. (Koelewijn, 1998, p. 18; author's translation)

It may be a contextual, i.e., manager-specific, matter whether the elite status is based on managers' extensive networks – or the other way around – but I take it as the defining characteristic of managerial elites that they are amply 'connected'. It is suggested below, that partially elite power comes from their extended social networks, and their ability to act as connectors (cf. Burt, 1992).

The connectedness of corporate elites has been looked into in some detail in the study of *interlocking directorates* within organisational sociology (see, e.g., Mintz and Schwartz, 1985; Mizruchi, 1992; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Useem, 1984). Of the two identifiable traditions within this research area, *resource dependence theorists* stress the role of interlocking directorates as mechanisms reducing uncertainties between firms, and *class based theorists* see them as links between powerful elites forming elite class networks. These traditions have not been able to produce convincing evidence concerning the actual significance of interlocking directorates for corporate performance. In Pettigrew's (1992) opinion, this is due to the research methods used (i.e., quantitative analyses). Theoretically, however, both of these approaches are supportive of the connectedness argument.

Besides the corporate interlocks, other research also points to the role of manifold social relationships in which corporate executives are deeply enmeshed, including their social, political, economic, religious, and family networks (Thomas, 1995). As is well known, the importance of familial ties has been recently strongly emphasised in explanations of the success of Asian economies and businesses (e.g., Fukuyama, 1995; Yeung, 1997). Useem (1984), in his well known study, identified what he called the 'inner circle' (a nation-wide web of top executives advising the highest levels of government and promoting a political environment favorable to business). Appadurai (1996, p. 9) points at the international dimension of connectedness by claiming that "[g]lobalisation has shrunk the distance between elites". All corporate managers, certainly, do not belong to such inner circles at the national or international scale. Many, however, belong to locally influential 'inner circles' of local political elites and networks of top executives. The more powerful ones among those may be able to favourably combine the power of their corporate resources and that of their external (national or international) connectedness. The various sets of social relations in which managers are involved may remain disparate, but it can also be seen as a part of their role to *make connections* between the various sets of social relations. This may function as an empowering resource for them (see below).

2.3. Embeddedness and social capital

That corporate managers tend to be extensively connected means that they are to various degrees *embedded* in several sets of social relations. 'Embeddedness' has been understood in a multitude of ways in the literature. Without engaging in a lengthy discussion of the various interpretations of this hazy notion (see Oinas, 1997), this paper adopts Portes and Sensenbrenner's (1993) view of it according to which actors' embeddedness in social relations endows them with *social capital* (cf. Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1986). Portes and Sensenbrenner contrast their view on social capital explicitly with that of Coleman's. Coleman "likens 'social' to 'material' and 'human' capitals as resources available to individuals to attain their ends" (ref. Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993, p. 1322). In their view, Coleman's approach suffers from instrumentalism in as far as it views social structures only as facilitating individual rational pursuits (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993, p. 1323). They emphasise instead that social capital has both positive and negative effects on economic outcomes (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993, p. 1322). Social capital "is generated by individual members' disciplined compliance with group expectations"; "[u]nder certain conditions these expectations can be appropriated as a resource" (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993, p. 1325). They define social capital as "those expectations for action within a collectivity that affect the economic goals and goal-seeking behavior of its members, even if these expectations are not oriented towards the economic sphere" (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993, p. 1323). Thus, embeddedness can be seen as the relation of actors to others in a collectivity which affects their behaviour, and may bear (positive) consequences on their (economic) action (Oinas, 1999).

The social capital that actors can draw through their embeddedness may have various contents and may serve them in various ways; it may bring them information, introduce them to new ways of believing and behaving, provide access to external material resources, collaborative relations, solidarity, etc. This is the reason why connectedness is an especially effective resource for elite members in their respective social settings. The fact that they can draw on the social capital that they have access to through their connections to various sets of social relations differentiates them and makes them powerful in each of those sets. In local contexts this is especially the case if other local actors are more locally oriented.

Thus, *managerial elites* in the local context can be regarded as power-holders who derive their power from the corporate resources that they manage as well as from the resources that they gain through their (local and extra-local) networks. The stronger their respective corporation and (often consequently) the stronger their networks, the stronger their local power position tends to be.

3. Interviews as Bakhtinian dialogues

The rest of this paper discusses the possibilities of getting access to managers' embeddedness through interviews. The interview situations between researchers and managers are regarded as dialogues (cf. Clark, 1997; Schoenberger, 1991). I am inspired by Miettinen (1993)

to draw the foundations for the following discussion from Bakhtin's[1] work on dialogicality in speech communication. Shotter and Billig (1998, p. 14) point at two basic insights that are fundamental for Bakhtinian thinking. First, "mental processes are created within our language-intertwined social practices, within our languaged activity". Secondly, "since languaged-activity is predominantly dialogical, then human thinking is also predominantly dialogical and, therefore, also marked by an internally complex two-sidedness", or "intersubjectivity" (Crossley, 1996).

The thought that knowledge is socially constituted and that our conceptions of the world around us depend on the socio–spatio-historical setting in which we live is not new as such to economic geographers any more than to scholars in other social sciences. What is helpful in the kind of 'sociocultural approach to mind' that Bakhtin's approach assists in developing is the connection it provides between psychological processes and cultural, historical, institutional – and spatial, a geographer would hasten to add – settings (Wertsch, 1991). The key to this connection, in Bakhtin's thinking, is dialogicality.

Some of the key analytical devices in Bakhtin's work on speech communication are briefly outlined in the following. They prove useful in approaching interview dialogues as possible passages to managers' embeddedness. At the same time this discussion draws our attention to the cultural and social nature of human consciousness which is an aspect of what was called 'embeddedness' above.

3.1. Voice, utterance, and dialogicality

Wertsch (1991) uses the '*voice*' metaphor that draws inspiration from Bakhtin's work. The voices we try to understand in a dialogue manifest "the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness" (Holquist and Emerson, 1981, 434; Ref. Wertsch, 1991, p. 51) of the individuals engaged in it. We get access to voices through concrete *utterances*. They are the 'real unit[s] of speech communication' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 67). While

sentence is a unit of language, utterance is a unit of speech communication (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 73).

> For speech can exist in reality only in the form of concrete utterances of individual speaking people, speech subjects. Speech is always cast in the form of an utterance belonging to a particular speaking subject, and outside this form it cannot exist. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 71)

Through these concrete utterances we can make sense of a particular 'speaking consciousness' which, in Bakhtin's account, "is concerned with the broader issues of a speaking subject's perspective, conceptual horizon, intention, and world view" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 51).

Utterances are never isolated units. They always reflect other utterances and they can only be understood and analysed as unique to the composite whole of a particular speech communication (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 91, pp. 108–109) which Wertsch (1991) calls 'intermental functioning'. Bakhtin "insisted at many points that meaning can come into existence only when two or more voices come into contact: when the voice of a listener responds to the voice of a speaker" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 52). In the absence of addressivity, i.e., "the quality of turning to someone else", the "utterance does not and cannot exist" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 99). These ideas result in a view of speech communication which is inherently dialogic in nature. Each utterance of a speaker in a dialogue expresses a particular position of the speaker, to which another speaker may respond. All rejoinders are linked to one another:

> And the sort of relations that exist among rejoinders of dialogue – relations between question and answer, assertion and objection, assertion and agreement, suggestion and acceptance, order and execution, and so forth – are [...] possible only among utterances of different speech subjects; they presuppose other [...] participants in speech communication. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 72)

Thus, "an utterance reflects not only the voice producing it but also the voices to which it is addressed" (Wertsch, 1991, p. 53). As Miettinen (1993, p. 20) reminds us, dialogicality does not refer to conversation alone but to the social nature of human consciousness in a broad sense. What is uttered in a dialogue is influenced both by the presence of an addressee, and by the surrounding broader sociocultural environment. Utterances are linked to others in very complexly organized chains of other utterances (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 69).

Accordingly, utterances in interview situations stem from the voices of the interviewer and the interviewee as they are propagated by the particular situated

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[1] Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) was a Russian scholar whose intellectual activities crossed disciplinary boundaries. In the West, his contributions in linguistics and literary studies are usually focused upon; Russian commentators regard him equally as a philosopher and social thinker (Gardiner and Bell, 1998, 9, fn 7). As contemporary Bakhtin studies are gaining increasing ground, diverse readings of Bakhtin seem to be emerging among both Western and Russian scholars (Emerson, 1997), and a range of social scientists have become inspired by him in recent years (see, e.g., Bell and Gardiner, 1998; Shields, 1991). Along with many of his generation of Soviet literary intellectuals, Bakhtin's scholarship was seriously intruded during the Stalinist rule. Bakhtin survived but largely had to write in grave circumstances in remote parts of the country. Much of his work was published only at an old age or posthumously. (Holquist, 1990)

speech communication, as well as by both party's past dialogical relationships which have shaped their voices.

3.2. Social language and speech genre

Unlike linguists such as de Saussure, for whom speech (*parole*) is "language as it is present only in a single speaker" (Holquist, 1990, p. 45; cf. Holquist, 1990, pp. 42–49, p. 60; Holquist, 1986, p. xvi), Bakhtin sees participants in speech communication as using more broadly shared 'speech genres' and 'social languages'.

[E]ach sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of [...] utterances. These we may call *speech genres*. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60)

If speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them, if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be almost impossible. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 79)

When we select words in the process of constructing an utterance, we by no means always take them from the system of language in their neutral, *dictionary* form. We usually take them from *other utterances*, and mainly from utterances that are kindred to ours in genre, that is, in theme, composition, or style. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 87)

The *choice of a particular speech genre* is determined by the specific nature of the given sphere of speech communication. Also semantic (thematic) considerations, the concrete situation of the speech communication, the personal composition of its participants, the social position of each speaker, the interrelations of the speakers, etc. determine the genres that are used in particular dialogues (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 78–79).

Genres correspond to typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and, consequently, also to particular contacts between the *meanings* of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 87)

The reasoning behind the idea of a *social language* is similar. While speech genres are characterized primarily in terms of the typical situations of speech communication, social languages are types of speech used by specific social strata such as a professional or age group or a social class (Holquist and Emerson, 1981, p. 430; Ref. Wertsch, 1991, p. 57). In reality these two are often thoroughly intertwined (Wertsch, 1991, p. 61).

For a corporate manager, as for anyone else, a specific speech genre is a means – even if not rationally attempted – to get access to the social capital inherent in specific social relations in which he is embedded: it facilitates communication and interaction with others who are involved. In doing that, a speech genre itself also functions as social capital. Understanding the embeddedness of a corporate manager through interview dialogues poses a difficult task for a researcher. In order to get access to his embeddedness, she has to possess, at least to a satisfactory degree, that very same social capital: she needs to understand and respond to the speech genre(s) and social language(s) used by the interviewee.

4. Configurations of voices and silences in interview dialogues

When dialogues between researchers and managers are successful, each party in the speech communication uses utterances in relation to the utterances of the other speaker, i.e., the utterances in the dialogue are intimately interlinked. This gives both partners in the interview a sense of understanding. This, of course, is not a self-evident outcome of the getting together of an interviewer and an interviewee. In all likelihood, the interviewer shares Bakhtin's attitude towards the interviewee:

When constructing my utterance, I try actively to determine this response. Moreover, I try to act in accordance with the response I anticipate, so this anticipated response, in turn, exerts an active influence on my utterance (I parry objections that I foresee, I make all kinds of provisos, and so forth). (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 96)

Yet, in many cases it is especially difficult to create circumstances that facilitate what Bakhtin further suggests:

When speaking I always take into account the apperceptive background of the addressee's perception of my speech, the extent to which he is familiar with the situation, whether he has special knowledge of the given cultural area of communication, his views and convictions, his prejudices (from my viewpoint), his sympathies and antipathies – because all this will determine his active responsive understanding of my utterance. These considerations also determine my choice of a genre for my utterance, my choice of compositional devices, and, finally, my choice of language vehicles, that is the *style* of my utterance. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 96)

The above largely presupposes that 'I', in the interviewer role, know my partner in dialogue. In interview

situations, this is often not the case. Indeed, in most cases we are previously unknown to each other. I can assume his ways of thinking etc., but in many cases it is difficult to *know* very much. Sensitivity of a high degree is needed in these situations; the ability to 'read' and 'feel' the personality and the special characteristics of the 'speaking consciousness' of the interviewee from his utterances. Indeed, this capability is needed in the early stages of the interview so that utterances can be quickly adjusted – to get going with the interview, to get at the issues that the interview is designed for. The emergence of a successful interview requires from the beginning that the interviewer and the interviewee are able to share a style of language that is intelligible for both.

The *social language* of the interviewer and the interviewee might have differences due to certain gendered, age-specific, ethnic and status characteristics (cf. Clark, 1997) etc., but they may also share similarities, building on similar experiences such as social background or level of higher education. Their respective familiar *speech genres*, however, are likely to differ to a considerable extent. If the spheres of activities where they originate are not shared how can an interview succeed? From this perspective, the researcher–manager encounter in an interview situation is challenging for both parties involved.

From the *academic researcher's* perspective, there seems to be two aspects in which the interviewer has to be well prepared – and sensitive on the spot. First, by creating an atmosphere that suggests common understanding to create a trustful interview dialogue. The more understanding and trust that is involved in an interview situation, the smoother it tends to work out, and the more successful it turns out to be. Such an atmosphere can be created through means related to aspects of social language: the 'voices' of an academic elite member (university, position, experience in the field, significance of the project from the manager's point of view) as well as the 'voices' of appearance and behaviour. This might not come naturally if the interviewer does not have a lot of experience in interviewing elites.

Secondly, the more important challenge concerns the substance of the abstract 'embeddedness', and the ability of the interviewer to translate academic terminology into questions that interest managers from the perspective of their life and work, in order for them to devote time to the ensuing dialogue. The key voice that the interviewer wishes to utter is the one of an academic researcher, relying on the speech genre of scientific language. However, at the same time, she needs to combine it with a speech genre that makes the issues that she wants to address intelligible and accessible to the interviewee. It is the interviewer's responsibility to make herself intelligible; to do the translation of academic jargon – not only to 'commonsense' language but to a speech genre that is familiar to the interviewee, that the

manager is able to respond to and be stimulated by. This is especially important as she needs to make the manager interested and relate to issues that are not at the core of his everyday business, are not easily accessible, and have to be explored through lengthy interviews.

From the *corporate manager's* perspective, the academic origin of the research topic means that he is not likely to have a 'ready-made' speech genre for the issues involved. In an interview situation, a manager will decide on the way he responds to the questions and responses of an interviewer, based on his (implicit or explicit) judgement on which kind of speech genre the interviewer wishes to elicit. It is not always evidently clear for the manager what the appropriate speech genre could be. The interviewer should be determined in her attempt to evoke the 'right' genre:

> The better our command of genres, the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them (where this is possible and necessary), the more flexibly and precisely we reflect the unrepeatable situation of communication – in a word, the more perfectly we implement our free speech plan. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 80)

In the following, I will explore two problems that might be seen as results of the inability of parties in an interview to handle the utterances stemming from different social languages and/or speech genres, namely the problem of silence and the problem of multivoicedness. The interviewer is responsible for being aware of and trying to avoid the consequences of these apparent problems.

4.1. The problem of silence

What is not uttered, or is uttered unclearly, in an interview situation can be captured by the metaphor of silence. Both the interviewer and the interviewee may remain silent about the things that they are not able or willing to utter.

The *interviewer* may *not wish* to utter some of her 'private voices' and may decide to keep silent about them and instead emphasise the academic background in general and perhaps strengthen this emphasis by a 'businesslike' appearance. Yet, trying hard to be 'businesslike' might not do a service to the attempt to create a trustful interview dialogue. If she expects a businesslike dialogue, and utters businesslike voices, that is what she is likely to get. Yet, in dialogues around issues such as embeddedness, as understood in this paper, the interviewer might be better off evoking some other voices of the other partner in dialogue.

The interviewer may also – *unintendedly* – end up remaining silent about her research object. This might

be because the conceptual work and operationalisation of issues related to embeddedness is still half-way, and this fact has not really been acknowledged in the literature. In theoretical academic communication, researchers seem to be able to get away with publishing texts in which concepts such as embeddedness are uttered, and yet remain silent about their precise meaning, i.e., they can fool their colleagues by utterances that *appear* knowledgeable. That, however, does not work in interview dialogues. Expecting non-academics to answer specific questions in speech genres that they master – expecting a Bakhtinian dialogue – requires that the interviewer is clear about the contents of embeddedness. If this is not the case she will not be able to penetrate into the core of her research object through empirical work.

As in the case of the interviewer, the interviewee may remain silent on issues he cannot speak about or does not want to reveal. In discussing the embeddedness of firms with an economic geographer, interviewees are supposed to express ideas on issues that stretch beyond their everyday business practice: they have to think beyond the 'strictly economic', and they have to think in spatial terms. Managers with their typical educational backgrounds (economics, business, engineering, law), may not have the vocabulary to account for their own or their firm's local or non-local embeddedness. He cannot do that because he has not gone through the mental process for formulating utterances concerning 'embeddedness'; it is not part of the discourse of colleagues, management consultants, or the likes; it is not part of his consciousness. In consequence, he is not likely to find himself at ease on a terrain that is not familiar. *Cultural embeddedness* (e.g., Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990, pp. 17–18) might be a case in point here: it is likely to be taken for granted and a manager is not used to thinking about its significance for neither everyday business nor the more important strategic decisions in which he participates. The result is silence. Or – because it might be part of the self-esteem of an elite member to seem in charge, to appear knowledgeable, to be able to say *something* – another possibility is that he will formulate utterances with 'wrong' contents, or 'cover contents' to hide the apparent lack of a particular speech genre to tackle a new issue.

The second type of silence has to do with an interviewee's *unwillingness* to utter voices on certain issues. Such issues may be related, e.g., to *political embeddedness* (their involvement in local power relations) or *personal connectedness* (the personal networks related to their elite role). In these cases the questions posed to them might be considered as moving to issues that are beyond his role as a manager. Silences may take different forms – an outright denial, answering a question that was not asked, and so on – but what remains is a silence concerning a kind of embeddedness that may influence firm decision-making.

Is further communication possible; and what does the interviewer need to do to enable it? Silence resulting from inability might be tackled by attempts to 'educate' the interviewee. Namely, as the Bakhtinian approach suggests, in a dialogic interview situation, the interviewer is not only gaining information and understanding about the position of the interviewee and his decision-making context but she is also involved as an active participant in the two-sided process in which both parties are influenced via interlinked, responsive utterances. She can elaborate on issues involved in recent scientific discussions, and on their possible significance for corporate and managerial practices in their (local) contexts. Such a formation of a manager's world view in the course of an interview dialogue might not be easy, and definitely requires the mastering of an appropriate speech genre. Silence resulting from unwillingness might be equally difficult to combat. Being able to relate closely to the interviewee and to utilise his speech genre as well as to elaborate the backgrounds for the reasons to enter 'undiscussed terrains' might be used to 'tease out' more information. Time tends to be a problem in both of these cases. It is problematic enough to find ways beyond the switchboards and secretaries and reach executive offices (Thomas, 1995; Useem, 1995); creating time for long elaborations as part of an interview situation – with often too short a time allocated for them in any case – is very difficult.

4.2. The problem of multivoicedness

Even though Bakhtin emphasises the social nature of individual speech experiences, he does not regard the speech of individuals as entirely determined by their respective social language or speech genre. In concrete utterances, "both the voice type of a speech genre and a concrete individual voice are simultaneously involved" (Wertsch, 1991, pp. 61–62). Individual's utterances are "filled with others' individual words, varying degrees of otherness" as well as with "varying degrees of our-ownness" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89).

> Each individual utterance [...], reflects the speech process, others' utterances, and, above all, preceding links in the chain (sometimes close and sometimes – in areas of cultural communication – very distant) (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 93).

Wertsch (1991, p. 59) refers to the process of producing unique utterances by speaking in social languages or speech genres as *multivoicedness*.

Firms and corporations develop their own speech genres. Distinct speech genres are also used in all the other spheres of life in which managers are involved. The interviewee enters an interview situation with his specific package of 'himselfness' and the 'otherness' of

the various social relations in which he is involved. All this can be reflected in his speech.

We can extend these considerations by suggesting that embeddedness presupposes that an embedded actor 'commands' the genre of the social relations in which he is involved and that he internalises their respective meaning systems. Consequently, due to their connectedness, members of elite classes may speak with many voices due to their multiple embeddedness in different social relationships. Thus, for actors that are embedded in several sets of social relations with different speech genres (and social languages), multivoicedness receives a special meaning: it involves the possibility (and requirement) of moving between those different speech genres, and possibly combining them in unique ways.

It has been taken as a defining characteristic of managerial elites above that they have powers over others due to the corporate resources that they control, and that they derive powers from their extensive networks. However, Bakhtin's work, makes us point out that elites are not entirely autonomous power-holders. While they may be able to use their personal and status-related networks to their own and/or to their corporations' advantage, they are also influenced by the social relations in which they are embedded through their networks. The social capital that they derive out of their specific social relations also leaves an imprint on their thinking and on their behaving – and on their utterances in an interview situation. "The question of the relative power of managerial elites [...] is a crucial empirical issue" (Pettigrew, 1992, p. 163). The idea of multivoicedness helps us formulate that issue also for the purposes of discussing interview situations.

Multivoicedness creates obvious problems in interview situations. The voice that an interviewee picks up in an interview situation depends largely on what the interviewer is able to invoke. For the interviewer, this presents the challenge of thinking through the possibilities in each case. She has to reckon what or who is embedded, and in what social relations.

Not only are *managers* embedded in social relations, Dicken and Thrift (1992) among others point out that *firms* as (collective) economic actors should be viewed as embedded as well. It can, indeed, be seen as involved in social relations both as a collective entity as well as via the embeddedness of its individual employees. How do we separate the embeddedness of managers from the embeddedness of firms? Or, to what degree is it even to be considered separable? Schoenberger suggests that

> managerial identities and commitments are closely entwined with, although not identical to, corporate identities and commitments. This is not because managers cannot tell the difference between themselves and the firm, but because who and what the firm understands itself to be are produced in

and through the actions and interpretations of the people in the firm, especially those of top management. The influence is reciprocal, though, insofar as the identity of the firm also influences identity formation on the part of these same individuals. (Schoenberger, 1997, p. 153)

Thus, due to the coevolution of managerial and corporate identities it is difficult to know whether a manager, in an interview situation, is uttering his *own voice* or the 'voice' of the *company (or one of its units) and its interests*. Yet, even if that is somehow made clear in his utterances, further complications arise from observing that it might still be difficult to distinguish between the different managerial voices within a corporation: members of the *top management team*, *heads of corporate units* or *lower managerial strata*. Which voices the individual utterances represent and which of them are the ones in intra-corporate power games that direct corporate strategic action is not a self-evident issue. Neither is it necessarily clear what the intra-corporate status of a particular interviewee (or his unit) is in a large corporation. Knowing that would affect the degree to which we can judge whether he speaks with the voice of, e.g., the headquarters of the corporation (which might be located at distance from the particular unit at question) or with the voice representing the interests of his particular unit. Depending on the questions discussed, a manager's speech may also represent, e.g., the point of view of an *R&D department* or a *personnel department*.

Besides the various intra-corporate voices, a manager may utter voices stemming from his external engagements. The voices he can evoke can relate to an *industry sector* discussing what should/could be done within the firms in this sector, e.g., to advance their competitiveness. A manager representing a large firm in a nationally significant sector may also speak with the *voice of a national industrial policy strategist* if he sits in state committees and advises government policy makers in industry-related questions. Members of *interlocking directorates* may speak with a broad range of voices, backed by insight to the practices of a range of companies.

Yet another kind 'voice' that I have encountered in managerial interviews is the '*voice of the present*'. It has been difficult to make managers take distance from the particularities of the present, and utter their view of the future. Posing counterfactual statements and hypothetical questions might be a strategy that helps in getting around this problem.

Further distinctions have to be made. When the question of, e.g., cultural or political embeddedness is addressed, besides the individual speaking in the *role of the manager*, the interviewer may wish him to speak as a *private person*. Managers as much as other employees (cf. Halford and Savage, 1997, p. 116), may be

differently embedded in or have different loyalties to the corporations that they serve. This is also likely to affect the degree to which they speak with managerial vs. private voices.

As a private person, a manager may speak as a *a local resident* who also shares his company's local environment as a surrounding for his family life, free time activities, visiting friends and relatives and so forth. He may also speak in the role of a player in local political games, which might be a role that he has played partly as an individual – being a talented manoeuverer – but it can of course be closely related to his managerial role. *Family background* ("his father is well known in the financial circles") may also affect an individual's utterances, or he may speak with the insight stemming from memberships in elite (sports or other) *clubs*, *free masonry* etc. In many cases an interviewee is more comfortable being silent about the sources of his insights.

Multivoicedness is obviously related to the problem of silence: it is difficult to know, among all the possible voices that a manager may speak with, whether he, knowingly or without intention, leaves some voices unuttered. Several rounds of interviews with other informants in the close circles of managers might provide the interviewer with information that helps in getting further information from him (cf. Thomas, 1995, p. 12), possibly in a follow-up interview. She might also be able to use a technique of evoking different, possibly imaginary, voices in her own speech to stimulate the manager to be conscious and explicit about the multiple voices behind his speech.

5. Conclusions: voices, silences, and accounting on the embeddedness of economic action

This paper has tried to raise awareness of the issues involved in interview dialogues in general (cf. Clark, 1997; Schoenberger, 1991) and in those aiming to shed light on the socio-cultural influences on economic action in particular. The former was discussed in this paper in terms of the Bakhtin-inspired notions of voices (and silences), social language and speech genre; the latter in terms of embeddedness. It was suggested that one way in which embeddedness can be understood is as the social capital that managerial elites derive from being extensively connected and which they possibly use to their advantage in carrying out their business. One of its expressions is to be found in their ability to use several speech genres and social languages in different contexts. Bakhtin's terminology was helpful in elaborating on the complexities involved in finding out about managerial elites' multiple embeddedness and its potential significance for corporate action. Multiple embeddedness means that managers may evoke differ-

ent voices. These different voices are likely to be resonated in managers' utterances in interview situations. A researcher faces the exigency of sensitivity and ability to 'hear' those different voices in an interviewee's utterances and also to recognise when silences should be turned into voices.

Due to multivoicedness, reflected in the – typically not distinctly identifiable – combination of 'otherness' and 'himselfness' in managers' speech, it is extremely difficult to track the various voices behind their utterances. In empirical work, the key problem is to find out about the voices with which a manager speaks; the epistemic access to embeddedness can be said to be determined by the proportion of voices to silences. The voices are important as they represent the social relations in which a manager is embedded and, in various proportions, may affect managerial and corporate decision-making. Empirical insight makes us better equipped in analysing the consequences of embeddedness on managerial behaviour and corporate strategies.

While this paper is predominantly about academic researchers 'descending' from their ivory towers to meet 'real world' actors in interview dialogues, there is also another kind of dialogue in which researchers are centrally engaged in: the academics' ivory tower dialogues with other academics. While academics can write articles endlessly using theoretical concepts with hidden or semi-spelled-out meanings, they cannot do that in a dialogue where they expect non-academics to answer questions in terms that are comprehensible to them. In an interview, the academic researcher has to help the manager to grasp theoretically interesting questions in terms that sound relevant for his managerial practice (managerial and other familiar speech genres). She also has to provide the motivation for the task at hand by making the manager knowledgeable of the potential theoretical relevance of his research (more distant reference to academic speech genres). In this respect, this paper can be read as a warning against going out to the fields of executive offices before the gravely needed conceptual work concerning embeddedness is brought to a more complete state. If and when that is done, and reflected upon in the necessarily multivoiced project of academic research, awareness of the complexity of finding out about multiple managerial voices and silences, as discussed in this paper, might also help in carrying out the much needed empirical research.

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