[Intro 0:00:00 - 0:00:14]

Bernard: Hello everyone, and welcome to this second episode of Words and Actions, a podcast that focuses on the importance of language in business professional contexts and politics. Words and Actions wants to go beyond a treatment of language as a mere means of communication, as something that we all can and that we all do without giving it much thought. And this is also something we mentioned in our first podcast.

So the basic idea is to make the trivial un-trivial, as we said, and to make the familiar unfamiliar by laying bare important aspects of language that go far beyond those of passing on information. In this way, we actually want to trigger your interest in language and we would also like you to observe what is happening around you and to share that with us.

So we have a blog, and we also have a Twitter account, if you just key in Wordsactions as one word, you will find that Twitter account. So that's why we're here. We want to raise your awareness about the power of language. In today's podcast, more specifically we will be talking about how language actually creates our social realities, how it influences and even determines how we perceive what we think is true, or how language is used by others to mould or even manipulate, let's say, our perceptions of reality. So not just in our daily lives, but also in a professional context.

We will do so in today's podcast by giving you a number of examples from research. In the first introductory part, we will have an interview with an expert [**0:01:45] Professor Dennis Mumby and we'll do a bit of data analysis of our own, which you will also find on our blog. So you're free to join in to provide comments on the blog and again, to provide us with comments or observations that you have via Twitter.

Your three hosts for today are Veronika Koller, Erika Darics, and me – Bernard De Clerck. I'll just introduce myself, because I'm talking anyway… So my name is Bernard De Clerck. I'm calling in from Belgium, where I work as a Lecturer in the Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication at the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at Ghent University.

Veronika: Right, I'm Veronika Koller. I work at the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University. But today, I'm actually dialling in, as it were, from the Orkney Islands in the north of Scotland, where I'm currently on holiday.

Erika: Hi, everyone. This is Erika Darics. I, too, am calling in from an exotic location, from Aalborg in Denmark, where I am giving a keynote at a very interesting conference called The Dark Side of Communication. This is where I will be meeting our guest today, Professor Mumby.

Bernard: There's lots of things to be said about language and how it constructs our realities, but what we consider to be objective reality, the way we frame it can have a fundamental effect on how we actually perceive it. I think we can just start off with a couple of studies that we've read or things that we would like to share with the audience to make this more explicit, to illustrate what we actually mean with this framing function of language and how it actually influences the perceptions that we have of reality.

Erika: This framing function of language and how the words we choose, and the effect these words can have on our memory and on our recollection of events, has interested scholars for a long time. There is a very famous study by Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer from the 1970s, in fact. They were psychologists who were interested in how questions can change how people recall memories.

In their very famous experiment, they showed a video of a series of car crashes to students and then they asked questions about the speed of the cars and what the students thought, how fast the cars were going. What they did was, though, they manipulated the words in

those questions and they went from how fast the cars were going when they contacted each other, when they hit each other, bumped into each other, collided with each other, and smashed into each other.

You probably can guess what happened – the answers varied depending on the words these people were exposed to. The stronger the verb, the higher speed they thought the cars were going. There was a very, very interesting follow-up experiment where they, again, showed videos of car crashes to students. Again, they exposed these students to the questions I mentioned before. And then about a week later, they invited these students back to answer additional questions. One of those questions was whether they recalled seeing broken glass.

Now, we are entering here a very dangerous field, because what happened, this is not a question of estimation. This is proper recollection of memories. And the words in the questions indeed affected whether students remembered seeing broken glass or not. So these early experiments in psychology were the beginning of this interest in how the way we express our thoughts and the words we choose and the grammar we choose can have a serious effect on both our observations and the experience of reality, but also importantly, they can affect our memories!

Veronika: I think it can also affect the way we vote, even. People have looked at how questions in, say, a referendum for instance are phrased, and how that might influence what answers people give. Or how questions are phrased polls of public opinion and that questions may be leading and may manipulate people to answer in a certain way but not another, which may be, you know, the ideological agenda of the organisation conducting the poll. So there's obviously also a political aspect to this.

Bernard: Now referring to business again, just by changing one simple word, studies have shown that you can actually increase or decrease customer satisfaction and complaint management. I'll just give a brief example. We were in touch with a company, and systematically, they had as phrasing when they were not accepting a complaint by

customers, "I'm afraid we have to reject your complaint." We told them, "Why don't you say, 'we can't accept your complaint'?" They implemented that, and we added an experiment to that. You can see an increase in customer satisfaction, just because we replaced "rejected" by means of "could not accept". So you see, that is framing reality and how it actually affects our perceptions.

In one obvious area where we can also see that, and I'm again referring to a professional context, is inflated job titles. I think you must have heard, or must have been exposed, let's say, to some of them.

Veronika: Oh, who hasn't been? (Laughs)

Bernard: If that is the case, Veronika, I will test you a bit.

Veronika: Okay, go on then.

Bernard: I actually had a look online at these embellished job titles. Of course the reason why people do that is to make a mundane job more interesting, but that the same time, they're also tricking people into applying for a job that they actually don't really want to do.

              So here's one example – what do you think a 'director of first impressions' is?

Veronika: A receptionist?

Bernard: Absolutely. (Laughter) Okay, another one – an 'access control manager'?

Veronika: An access control manager? A janitor? A security guard?

Bernard: Mmm… yes. Actually in this particular case it was a doorman, a bouncer.

Veronika: Oh right, okay.

Bernard: It sounds more important when you of course refer to it as an access control manager. Now, I will finish with one particular example, and I would like to have the job title, and I would like to have a look at the actual job description, just to illustrate what is going on here. So here we have a 'domestic equipment maintenance engineer', right? And it

says, "A successful growing water treatment company in Surrey is looking for a domestic equipment plant maintenance engineer to join our team. Great salary!"

Here's the job description: "Conducting maintenance checks and maintaining domestic water treatment equipment. Water systems filter changing. Delivery of salt to the water softener customers." So that's it. So what you have is a very fancy job title, but when you have a look at the actual job description, what you get is you have to change filters and you have to deliver salt to the customers.

Then it says that the salary was great, but when I had a look at the salary, which was explicitly mentioned, you could see that it was far below the average you have in the UK. So this again is another way of framing, in this particular case a job title, and how it actually influences our perceptions.

Erika: Yes, I guess this is the sign of the kind of shift in our economy towards people doing gigs and performing stuff. It sounds bigger, and the bigger it sounds, the better, and everything is inflated and people are performing…

Bernard: Absolutely. What I also saw the other day… And then I'm thinking of the millenials and how they want to reach the millenials is a 'customer service ninja'.

Veronika: Oh dear. You couldn't make it up, could you? (Laughs)

Bernard: And an 'innovation alchemist', which is basically an IT-er. An 'innovation alchemist', and the job description was to provide new code for software solutions.

Veronika: I mean, this is fascinating, because it sort of blends over into popular culture, into fantasy and martial arts films and what have you. This is really fascinating stuff. But again, it's to do with increasing precariousness of the workplace, and therefore motivating people to take on the risk of more precarious jobs, etc., which is indeed what we'll be discussing a bit with our interview guest, and then later on in the analysis as well.

[Music 0:10:06]

Erika: Our guest on today's podcast is Professor Mumby. Professor Mumby is from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in the States. And he's world renowned for being the driving force behind the School of Critical Organizational Communication. His research focuses on relationships among discourse, power, and organising, and importantly, the processes of control and resistance and how these are discursively produced, maintained and transformed.

I'm meeting Professor Mumby in the beautiful building of Musikkens Hus – I hope I pronounce it right; my Danish is not the best – in Aalborg in Denmark, where we met at a really interesting conference.

Welcome to our podcast.

Prof Mumby: Thank you very much. It's very nice to be here.

Bernard: Good morning, Professor Mumby.

Veronika: Hello! Lovely to meet you.

Prof Mumby: Lovely to meet you, too.

Veronika: At least on Skype. I hope your plenary went well.

Prof Mumby: It's always hard to tell when people are sitting in the audience, staring at you sometimes blankly, sometimes with interest. So you know, those self doubts always start to creep in as you're talking. But I push them to the back of my mind and I just soldiered on.

Veronika: I'm sure it went well. We're very glad to catch you right after your plenary. That's a great privilege, really.

Prof Mumby: Yeah, this should be fun.

Veronika: And it's great that we have you today, because this is our second episode of the Words and Actions podcast. And today we are all about how language and communication is used for the social construction of reality in organisations, mostly. To start off, you've just published the second edition of Organisational Communication, your very well-

known book. And there you describe communication as the lifeblood of organisations. Interesting organism metaphor there.

We would like you to elaborate a bit on what you call the communicative constitution of organisations. Could you just talk our audience through that a bit, what you mean by that?

Prof Mumby: For sure. Well, this is a perspective that has come to the fore in the last sort of 20 or 30 years. I mean, the old more traditional perspective was that organisations were these fixed structures and that people work in organisations, live in organisations, and that the communication that they engage in occurs inside these fixed structures. So if you think about the organisation as being the container for these streams of information that people send around.

So the basis for that idea is that communication is about effectiveness. How do you effectively transmit information from point A to point B? And then starting really in the early 1980s, people started and scholars started to challenge this idea and to say that, no, communication isn't just this matter of sending information from point A to point B.

Veronika: So getting away from the conduit model.

Prof Mumby: Yes, exactly. Getting away from the conduit model. It was in some respects still a dominant model in organisational practice. This communicative constitution idea is the idea that communication doesn't exist *in* organisations; rather, communication actually creates organisations. So what organisations really are is people acting collectively through communication processes. But if you take communication away, you really don't have organisations per se.

What organisations really are is the collective construction of social realities through people's interactions, through their communication processes. When people tell stories to each other, so for example, when somebody describes their organisation as being "like a family", that metaphor is not just information you're telling somebody, it's describing how people experience that organisation. That they engage

with their colleagues as if they are members of an extended family so that the language itself actually shapes people's experience.

So there's a very famous phrase from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who says, "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun." So this idea that we create these webs of meaning, and how do we create these webs of meaning? We create it through communication, through signification processes. We create these webs of meaning, then we live in them.

Veronika: For better or worse, yeah.

Prof Mumby: Yes, for better or worse. Sometimes that is dysfunctional; sometimes it's functional. So that's what we mean when we say that communication constitutes organisation. So the very idea of culture. Culture is communicative; culture is shared. When we talk about organisational culture, we're talking about the social reality that is really the lifeblood of what an organisation actually is

Veronika: In one publication, you talk about the three spirits of capitalism and you talk about the pre-Fordist, the Fordist and the post-Fordist, which we are in now, at least in developed economies. Could you elaborate a bit on the role of communication in these three ages or spirits of capitalism?

Prof Mumby: The model of communication is clearest probably in the Fordist and post-Fordist. With the pre-Fordist, it's probably… I would say it's characterised more by custom and tradition, so this idea that society is shaped by fairly fixed structures, by habits, customs, it's sort of difficult to change one's status. And so the communication processes reflected one's position in society.

Veronika: Pretty fixed position, yeah.

Prof Mumby: Yeah, so it's about sort of… Talk about pre-Fordist or pre-modern, this idea that one is positioned in one's community in a particular way, for better or worse, and the chances of moving through the social order, up the social hierarchy is limited.

So in some respects, Fordism is one of the main corporate or organisational forms within the system of modernity, so this idea that science and reason come to the fore, the idea that science and technology can be used to make people's lives better.

Veronika: What you find in the Fordist spirit of capitalism, would you find a lot of inter-discursivity there, where people borrow the language of science and technology to apply it to labour processes?

Prof Mumby: Yes, absolutely. So in some respects, the 20th century field of management developed as a way to manage labour processes, to manage people in the emerging large bureaucratic organisation. So in some respects the Fordist model is the bringing together of particular techniques about how work itself should actually be done, and the large bureaucracy.

So that bureaucratic model where you have a sort of meritocratic system where people can come into an organisation, where they can start on the bottom floor, start in the mailroom or something and become corporate president, right? The idea of the career arc, the lifelong career. So in that model, the model of communication tends to be very technocratic and based upon rational principles and based upon bureaucratic principles.

So that idea of communication as information I think is sort of in a lot of ways dominant in that Fordist model. How do you manage tasks? How do you manage roles and responsibilities? How do you manage formal organisational processes? Max Weber's idea of the bureaucracy as the kind of dominant model, he saw bureaucracy as kind of the best institutional form in modernity, because it is in many respects a sort of a meritocratic system. It overcomes that old model of custom and tradition that people were locked into. And that model is sort of dominant for most of the 20th century, until really the 1970s when it started to break down.

Veronika: So what happened then in the 1970s and onwards?

Prof Mumby: What happened was that we went through an economic crisis, particularly large corporations started to be dysfunctional because

they couldn't adapt to change. There was a need for a more sort of decentred organisational model, a need for more flexible organisational forms, the ability to adapt to changing conditions. So you started to see organisations adopt new models of organising, flatter models, decentralised models, team-based models where…

Veronika: So less hierarchical models.

Prof Mumby: Yes, less hierarchical, where sort of change and flexibility is the order of the day, and the idea of having the same job for one's entire working life started to become a thing of the past. Most people today think in terms of… think about, how my students think about their work lives. They understand that they need to have transferable skills, skills that will transfer from one job to another, because they're not going to be in the same job for more than three or four years, possibly.

Veronika: And obviously soft skills and communicative skills rank pretty high among those transferrable skills, I would have thought.

Prof Mumby: Exactly. I mean, because in many respects, organisations these days are based upon communication processes. We live in the age of communicative capitalism, something I was talking about in my talk today. So this idea that companies now are less interested in the actual industrial production and more interested in designing products that are going to communicate to people in particular ways. Communication itself becomes monetised.

Veronika: Absolutely. In the next episode, we'll talk at branding. I think you have a case study in your book on branding.

Prof Mumby: Yes, I think I have a couple, yeah.

Veronika: We were interested in one in particular.

Bernard: The one I was particularly interested in, Dennis, is the one on the diamond industry, because you were talking about language and how it shapes realities and how it shapes organisations, and you have a very nice case study there. Maybe that would be interesting for the listeners if you could just briefly elaborate on that and how language was used there, specifically in the diamond industry to shape reality.

Prof Mumby:	I have to say, this is a case that I love to use with my students, because it sort of hits so close to home for them – both the men and the women in the classes that I teach, but particularly for women, I start out by asking the women in the class if at some point in their lives, they would like to have a nice big, shiny diamond engagement ring on their fingers. And probably three quarters of them raise their hands. Then I ask the men about…
Veronika:	But hands without rings on them, as yet.
Prof Mumby:	Most hands without… Some of them, even at the age of 20, 21, some of them already have diamond engagement rings on their fingers. I ask them why they want that. It's a sign of love, right? It's a sign of how much my boyfriend or girlfriend loves me, right?
Bernard	Okay.
Prof Mumby	And I say, "And these are very expensive. Why are diamond rings so expensive?"
	And they say, "Well, because diamonds are rare." And I say, "Actually no, diamonds are not rare at all. Diamonds are very, very plentiful. The only reason that they're rare is because there is a diamond cartel that has existed since the late 19th century which has controlled the flow of diamonds onto the market."
Veronika:	Controlled supply, yeah.
Prof Mumby:	So this diamond cartel, De Beers, had to figure out how to market this product which was actually plentiful, but they needed to restrict. So one of the things that they did was to develop a marketing campaign in the early 20th century, which developed a direct connection between diamonds and love, a connection that hadn't really existed before. So this product, this carbon-based product became a symbol. It became imbued with meaning, imbued with signification.
Veronika:	But completely arbitrarily so.
Prof Mumby:	Completely arbitrarily so.

Veronika:	It's like red roses. There's nothing inherent in red roses that makes them a symbol of romance.
Prof Mumby:	Yes, right. And the other thing, too, is that they… And then in the 1950s, a very well-known branding phrase, "A diamond is forever." That was very strategic. A diamond becomes an heirloom for people, and part of the reason for that is that if people saw a diamond as a commodity rather than as an heirloom, they would think about selling it. Diamond companies don't want you to sell your diamonds, because that will decrease the value, it would decrease the price of diamonds on the market.
	So you have this whole system of meaning that's been created in order to get you to part with your hard-earned money, right? Just by creating this connection between a carbon-based product and the feeling of love. Now, what's interesting for me is that even when you explain this to students, at the end of the discussion, they all still want a diamond ring. (Laughter) Which to me shows the power of emotion, the power of affect, the extent to which you can intellectually understand something.
Veronika:	But you still want that thing that you have constructed as a proof of love.
Prof Mumby:	Exactly. Which demonstrates the power of branding and the power… The branding is really not about cognition. It's about affect. It's about emotion. It's about connecting people emotionally to a particular set of meanings, which then they find very hard to disconnect that relationship.
Bernard:	So despite the fact that your audience is fairly critical, I assume, they stick to that particular framework.
Prof Mumby:	Yeah even though after class some students will come to me and say, "Oh, that was really eye-opening for me. It makes me think about the whole business of getting an engagement ring in a whole different way." But of course, it's very public as well. So it's not only about your own feelings, it's about others, too.

Veronika: It's about marking status, isn't it as well?

Prof Mumby: Yes, marking status and what other people think – but wait, you don't have an engagement ring? You're getting married to this person and you don't have an engagement ring? What kind of person is that that you're marrying? What's wrong with you? So it's a very public thing as well as a whole other level of pressure in terms of what social norms are. It's hard to go against those. But again, it's all discursively constructed, right?

Bernard: Talking about discursive constructions and critical audiences, I notice that in the second edition of your book, you've added a chapter on organisations and corporate social responsibility. Now, that is not a coincidence, I suppose. [This of course 0:25:24] is one of the areas in which people or companies can legitimise their activities on social, environmental and governmental level, via language, right?

                  But I have the impression that companies are pushed more and more into a dialogic negotiation of that legitimacy with their empowered stakeholders. And you can actually see that when you have a look at the covers of sustainability reports, for instance. I saw one from Toyota in 2008. There you can actually see a Toyota Prius emitting flowers and daffodils and butterflies. That no longer works nowadays, I would think, because the sustainability report of 2018 is just a blue and white cover with 'Sustainability Report' on it and that's it.

                  So I have the impression that things are indeed changing and people are becoming more critical and the obvious greenwashing, making your company more environmentally friendly than it really is, I think time is over for companies to do that. What do you think? Can you actually see changes over time in these discursive practices and how companies shape realities with regards to their legitimisation?

Prof Mumby: I think you're exactly right. I think you really see sort of the rise of the branded company in the 1980s, so the brand becomes the foremost thing, and certainly an important part of that branding in recent years has been around corporate sustainability, corporate social

responsibility. I think because as you said, a lot of it was greenwashing.

I think that's part of the move away from the focus on the product per se, and the move toward the actual sort of corporate image in part because the brand from a corporate perspective is the most viable thing that a corporation owns. So it's through the management of the brand that the corporation increases its value. So a danger to that… right? So brands are both incredibly powerful and incredibly vulnerable as well, because they are based on meaning. They are based on discursive struggle, discursive negotiation, discursive management.

Then it doesn't take very much at all for a brand to become destabilised, right? So to the degree that a company is exposed as engaging in greenwashing rather than actual empirically evident sustainable practices, then I think it gets into trouble. I think you're right, I think there has been this sort of social movement toward holding companies accountable for their activities and they have to be increasingly careful.

You think about the dive that Volkswagen took, right? With their sort of emissions issue – they marketed/ branded themselves as an environmentally responsible car manufacturer and that was exposed to be completely untrue, right? So I think to the degree that companies are heavily invested in brands, they have to be very… I think they're becoming increasingly careful about not engaging in activities that can be exposed as superficial.

Veronika: That sort of brings us back to your idea, which we found really fascinating, about communicative capitalism. And the final thing we are very interested in is the changing role of responsibilities between the capitalist, the employer, shifting to the employee, because later in this episode we'll be looking at a bit of data to do with the gig economy, as it's known. Could you comment a bit on the role that communication plays in that? And where the responsibility has shifted for communicative competence?

Prof Mumby: Right, so this idea that… What's at the centre of this is the idea of risk, right? The idea that under the traditional more sort of Fordist based economy, risk always existed at the top. And of course this still exists today to a large degree, but think about the venture capitalist who maybe invests a million or 10 million or 100 million dollars in a particular company, and puts out all the risk and also with the possibility that they may get a large return on their money or they might lose their money.

Under the more sort of neoliberal model, what's been happening is that companies have been externalising risk. They've been shifting risk and the risk is being increasingly shifted downwards.

Veronika: To self-employed staff, yeah.

Prof Mumby: Not even necessarily self-employed staff, but even employed staff. Even employed staff as well – unless you're part of a very small group of core employees, the chances are that they're on like zero hour contracts with companies, or exist in a sort of adjunct kind of status. So this idea that risk at the [** 0:30:22] level, risk for the normal worker has been sort of normalised. So workers are thought about more as human capital, so they are their own venture capitalists in that sense.

Veronika: Yeah, they're the entrepreneurial person, yeah.

Prof Mumby: Exactly, the entrepreneurial self who must brand themselves in order to increase the value of their human capital. So the argument is that risk doesn't just exist at the margins – people who are maybe long-term unemployed or long-term under-employed, but it's very everybody. Everybody is in a sense under the threat of insecurity and exists in a more insecure state. The only way to push back in security is to take risks, to engage in venture capital, to burnish your brand as much as possible. So that becomes… It's a fundamentally communicative process.

Veronika: Yeah, with the responsibility resting with the individual there, yeah.

Prof Mumby: There's a very interesting book by Brooke Duffy, and the book is called 'On Not Getting Paid to Do What You Love'. It's about mostly female

fashion bloggers who basically, they blog about fashion and they try and gain as large an audience as possible with the hope of that translating into a paid gig of some kind. Of course, 95% of them never make any money from it at all. But they are constantly invested in this process in a very risky kind of context of trying to gain brand visibility as an individual.

Veronika: That actually perfectly leads over to the next section of this episode, because we'll be looking at the company Avon recruiting women to sell cosmetics, in a sort of gig economy way. So that's just the perfect segue into that, the fashion bloggers and then on to Avon.

Prof Mumby: There's actually a very interesting article by Katie Sullivan and Helen Delaney on exactly that – a company called Arbonne International – talking about how they recruit people to sell their cosmetics. It's a very interesting piece.

Veronika: We'll make sure to put a link to that on the website that goes with this podcast. Dennis, we could go on. We could go on for another half hour. It's absolutely fascinating and I feel we've only really just scratched the surface of your work. I'm afraid we need to leave it here. Thank you so much for rushing from your plenary to this recording.

Prof Mumby: I was more than happy to do it and I've really enjoyed the conversation.

Veronika: Thank you very much for your time.

[Music]

Right, okay, so then following on from that – we have a look at a bit of data. This is taken from the website of the Avon Cosmetics Company, but we would stress that this is just one example of many. You could choose other companies that operate a similar business model. The text that we looked at is to be found at the YourAvon.com website, and it's a section where they're trying to recruit women working for them, basically selling the cosmetics among their friends, etc., working as their own business unit, if you will.

So here's what the website has to say: "Work from home any time, anywhere. Part-time, full-time, any time. Your dream gig starts now. Sign up, select your starter set, start earning. Earn more doing what you love. Part-time or full-time, in sweats or stilettos, sell Avon anytime, anywhere, online and in-person. Sign up, select your $30 starter set and start earning."

Then they go on to say, "Beauty backed by brains. When it comes to building your business, we're here to help open the door to new opportunities. You get first dibs on new launches, a personal Avon advisor, and the chance to go on amazing trips. You want in on this."

And then finally they talk about their corporate brand: "We're more than just makeup. We're inspired by our community of passionate women. The Avon nation is all about celebrating each other and our achievements in business and in life, inviting others to join us and committing to be a force for good." And then they give the interested woman three steps on how they can sign up to become an Avon representative.

A short text, but we think there's a lot in it. So their business model is obviously that these women work as individual entrepreneurs. They get help from Avon. They have to pay a down payment to sign up… to make a one-off payment to become an Avon representative and then it's up to them, with a bit of help from the company.

So in terms of language, a couple things that are really striking there, is that there's lots of direct address – it's really "you want in on this." There's lots of imperatives like "sign up", "select your starter package", etc. So direct call to action.

It's also very informal. It's like you're just chatting to somebody, although this is a big company addressing you on the net. So it's about "select your faves", instead of favourite, or "network like a pro", instead of professional, or "you get first dibs", which means you get the first choice on something.

Erika: Yes, and of course the "dream gig", too.

Veronika: So that sort of taps into the idea, I want to be, I don't know, a singer or an actor or what have you, where in fact you're selling cosmetics.

Bernard: What struck me as well is that they make it sound so easy. If you do this and if you do that and if you just follow up on the instruction that we give you, this will happen to you. This will alter your life. That I think is something that struck me, because we know that it's not that easy to earn money with this particular set-up. What do you think?

Veronika: Well, they do make it sound easy and convenient. They even say so. They say, "It's super easy." You get this sort of exaggerated language that has also been described as stereotypically feminine. You know, it's super easy, it's just three easy steps, one, two, three, etc. And they present themselves, the company, Avon in this case, as the facilitator. They say, "We're here to help you open the doors. We know how to make you successful. So yes you're out on your own, but at the same time, we look after you." So there's a bit of reassurance going on there as well, I think.

Erika: Exactly. So there's very little language or reference to the actual work people will be doing, going from house to house or calling up friends and annoying people around them by showing them samples of stuff. It's all about a lifestyle and achievements, and I really like the third bit about the corporate culture, where they talk about being more than just the makeup. It's so easy, look at the sentence, they go, "The Avon nation is all about celebrating each other and our achievements in business and life, inviting others to join us and committing to be the force of good." It's almost like a sisterhood or a hippie commune where we dance around the fire and we are inviting others to join and we are being a force of good.

Veronika: Yeah, it's a way of repackaging – and I choose the metaphor deliberately here – it's a way of repackaging feminism for the gig economy, isn't it? It's tapping into the old slogan of sisterhood as powerful and repackaging it for precarious employment. It's a kind of commodifed feminism, really. Just for good measure, they throw in this metaphor of the 'Avon nation'. You know, the big community where we're all… Yeah, they even call it a community of passionate women.

It's very interesting what's going on here and where they take the inspiration from – namely much earlier feminist slogans, and how these slogans are then put into this new context of modern day gig economy.

Bernard: What I also notice is that, how they legitimise themselves again, by referring to… here I will quote again, "We use our strong voice for causes that support healthy, positive lifestyles." Then below that, you can see things like, "Contributed more than $800 million to breast cancer crusades, educated millions about breast health, funded nearly 20 million mammograms and clinical breast exams."

So you see, it's all very commercial, that they want people to sell their products, but at the same time, they legitimise their business by referring to what they actually do for women as well in terms of health.

Veronika: Yeah, and that's something that they really use, this particular company, as a communicative strategy. So in our book, Erika and I have looked at another part of the website really, where they use metaphor to very good effect, in a way, where they say, "This is the company that puts mascara on lashes and food on the table." As they say here, it's that, "Knows the value of a perfect line and still opens [its 0:38:54] mouth," or something like that.

They really make this case, as you observe, that yes, it's about cosmetics, but this is not frivolous. This is for a higher good. So that again ties in with corporate social responsibility, you know, what you talked about with Dennis Mumby, Bernard. They are also doing some corporate branding and employer branding here, really.

Erika: Yes, and in terms of the specifics, just looking very closely at what you see and what you read, whoever designed this copy, they were very well trained in rhetoric, because you can see the flow of the golden three, there are lots of golden threes all over – "home, any time, anywhere", "part-time, full-time, any time", then three images, then you get first dibs on launches, advisor and chance to go on amazing trips. Lots of utilisation of the use of the threes, which is obviously considered to be a persuasive device.

Veronika:	Classical rhetorical strategy, you know. Have you also noticed the alliteration? So at one point fairly early on, they say, "Sign up. Select your starter set. Start earning." So lots of "s" sounds.
Erika:	Sweats or stilettos.
Veronika:	Sweats or stilettos.
Bernard:	Oh nice, absolutely.
Erika:	(Laughs)
Veronika:	So this sounds all very chatty, very informal, informal as if your best girlfriend is talking to you or something. But in fact, it's very carefully crafted and it ties into a particular economic constellation like the gig economy, and makes it very palatable. And as I said initially, Avon is just one example of companies who operate with this economic business model, but also who put a lot of work into crafting their texts.
Bernard:	Right, absolutely. Can I just ask you a question? What do you think of this one – "We celebrate personal impact," and then 'comma', "one woman at a time." I find this a bit… In a way it's a bit weirdly framed, I would say. Why do they have this, "One woman at a time"? What is the desired impact of that particular phrase, do you think?
Veronika:	I think it's to make it personal again. So you have also this direct address, like they show mostly individual women, maybe two women together, but mostly individual women, because it is the individual entrepreneur, like Dennis Mumby said. It's the individual woman and, yes, you may talk about the nation and you may talk about the community, but at the end of the day, it's an individual woman at her desk or kitchen table at home doing this. And I think that's where the personalisation comes in as well. It's one woman at a time.
Bernard:	Yeah, absolutely.
Erika:	And don't we all love very wishy-washy phrases like "celebrate". I mean, I would love to see that celebration. (Laughter)
Veronika:	Yeah, that has really become some sort of corporate cliché, hasn't it? To celebrate something.

Erika: Yes. Well in talking about empty phrases or wishy-washy phrases, it's something that we may discuss in greater detail next month when we are going to be talking about brands and branding.

Veronika: Indeed. Yeah, so you'll want to join us for that, because that's the next episode that's coming up.

Bernard: Absolutely. So we'll be talking about branding and how companies actually carefully construct the names for their products for instance, and we'll talk about that and how that also in a way influences the way we perceive reality and by implication their products. By the way, if you can actually come across interesting job titles, so the ones that we talked about, feel free to share them as well with us.

Male: Thank you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the podcast, which was brought to you with the support of the Centre of Critical Inquiries into Society and Culture at Aston University in the UK, and the Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication at the University of Ghent, Belgium.

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