ORDINARY LANGUAGE AND DIALOGUE IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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Ramoglou and McMullen (2022) argue that the mystification of the nature of "opportunity" can be dissolved, the conceptual foundations of entrepreneurship theory can be clarified, and the field can be reoriented by theory that takes Wittgenstein's (1958) ordinary language philosophy into account. Ramoglou and McMullen's (2022) thoughtful analysis demonstrates how, in the domain of management studies, attention to the philosophy of ordinary language can enable practice to inform research and preempt movement toward theoretical dead-ends. We agree that an ordinary language perspective provides a useful, but neglected, foundation. In addition, we applaud the introduction of actualization theory and its associated model focused on desirable future world states (A), the courses of action followed (B), and necessary conditions in which that action occurs (C), the ABC model.

In engaging with their work, we particularly appreciate this attention given to Wittgenstein and language. Indeed, Ramoglou and McMullen (2022) note that "a frequent critique of Wittgensteinian contributions is that they are relatively unimportant because they are 'just about words' (Wittgenstein, 1958: 370)," and that "… such critiques trivialize language because they fail to appreciate that concepts offer the only way of thinking about the world" (2022: 29-30). It is on this basis that Ramoglou and McMullen (2022: 31) argue that "we need to disentangle the word 'opportunity' from descriptions of what entrepreneurs do." What we appreciate is how their ABC model thus moves from language and thought (i.e., expressions of opportunity), to language and action (i.e., entrepreneurial work). However, we believe that in their paper they are not sufficiently explicit in terms of language and *inter*action with the world. That is, Ramoglou and McMullen

(2022) refer to other individuals and stakeholders in their paper with descriptive language such as: inviting others to understand, coaxing consumers, hustling critical stakeholders, developing bonds and networks, engaging in legitimating efforts, seeking support from stakeholders, and so forth. Of course, interaction is *implicit* in such language; but what is missing is an *explicit* articulation of theory regarding how this *inter*action occurs in ordinary language. In this regard, the ordinary language perspective of Ramoglou and McMullen (2022) does not yet capture the notion that language "mediate[s] interactions, modes of behavior, and actions of more than one individual" (Habermas, 1987: 5). And while we applaud the focus on the language of the individual entrepreneur, language itself is thus inherently interactive (Shotter, 2008). It is such interaction that we believe is also needed to bring ordinary language philosophy more fully into entrepreneurship research.

We thus see a possibility to extend the impact of Ramoglou and McMullen (2022) by focusing additional attention on the interactive nature of ordinary language in the contexts of entrepreneurial action. We suggest an approach that incorporates the dialogue that emerges as entrepreneurs interact with potential stakeholders. A dialogic approach, we argue, can reveal the broader, perhaps even more systematic, potential of an ordinary language philosophy in the analysis of what entrepreneurs do as they pursue opportunities. Our response has three interconnected themes that correspond to Ramoglou and McMullen's (2022) ABC model. They write, "to talk about 'a real opportunity' is to express confidence that a desirable world-state A can actualize, following course of action B, when the necessary conditions C are believed to exist" (p. 4). We explore each in turn.

DESIREABLE WORLD STATES AND FOCALITY IN ORDINARY LANGUAGE

Concerning "opportunity-talk" as it relates to the actualization of "desirable world-states" (Ramoglou & McMullen, 2022: 13), we observe how some prior entrepreneurship research has

been effective in reorienting the field toward "what we have always known" (p. 10) regarding the use of ordinary concepts in entrepreneurship. As an example, alluded to by Ramoglou and McMullen (2022), the language of *an opportunity for someone* (third-person opportunity) and *an opportunity for me* (first-person opportunity) has emerged as a useful distinction in entrepreneurship theory and practice that is based in ordinary language (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). Helpfully, in his work on narratives Genette (1983) highlights how first- and third-person narratives differ in terms of the focality of the perspective and point of view in language use. This analysis suggests that attention to focality, "the question *who sees*, and the question *who speaks*" (1983: 186, emphasis in original) is fundamental to understanding a narrative in ordinary language.

Third-person opportunities and first-person opportunities vary in their focality as explanations for the articulation of desirable future world-states. In the third-person case, the focality does *not* necessarily center on the entrepreneur: *an opportunity for someone*; whereas in the first-person case, the focality does center on the entrepreneur: *an opportunity for me*. But there is a third kind of focality to consider. This kind of focality is represented in a second-person narrative (Genette, 1988), which enables us to extend the realm of "confidence-talk" (Ramoglou & McMullen, 2022: 4) concerning a desirable world state beyond the perspective of the individual entrepreneur to one that is more interactive. In explanations for confidence-talk in the second-person case, the focality centers on dialogue with stakeholders: *an opportunity for you* (see e.g., Mitchell, Israelsen, Mitchell, & Lim, 2021).

Helpfully, recent research has theorized how such interaction constitutes a second-person opportunity by drawing upon theory regarding dialogue (Graumann, 1995) "… to better explain the social processes underlying why, how, and when some actors are more likely to be identified and enrolled as stakeholders, while others are not" (Mitchell et al., 2021: 5). Specifically, this work

develops theory about how stakeholder enrollment requires dialogue that enables commonality, mutuality, and reciprocity with respect to opportunities. We suggest here that dialogue may be conceived of as a type of confidence-talk, enabling "confidence about what can be achieved through entrepreneurial action" (Ramoglou & McMullen, 2022: 17). Similarly, Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell, and Lim (2021) recently theorized what might be considered as another type of confidence-talk, wherein they articulated the importance of situating an immediate entrepreneurial narrative within a larger set of established historical narratives that are more broadly understood by a variety of stakeholders.

In other words, narrative construction is a crucial mechanism whereby entrepreneurs and their dialogue partners establish confidence in relation to actualizing a desirable world state as a result of their collective efforts (e.g., Garud, Schildt, & Lant, 2014; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). The use of narratives in dialogue thus represents a foundation for how entrepreneurs and a variety of stakeholders can interact with one another (Mitchell et al., 2021; Suddaby et al., 2021). In narrative theory, the term for such forms of interaction is polyphony (Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016), which connotes the integration of a variety of voices in processes of narrative construction. Accordingly, we suggest that a dialogic perspective of ordinary language that captures a wide array of narratives can serve to broaden the focality of entrepreneurship theory, to encompass the commonality, mutuality, and reciprocity that sustain the dialogue through which stakeholders are identified and enrolled (Mitchell et al., 2021). This process explains how narrative construction might, in the ABC model for example, enable entrepreneurs to move from third-, to first-, and then to second-person opportunities—where second-person opportunities enable critical stakeholders to be enrolled. The focality of second-person opportunity thus represents a central part of a dialogic approach for ordinary language in the actualization of desirable world states. We then wonder how

such approaches that capture *inter*action can be further integrated within an ordinary language perspective, especially considering other recent work by Ramoglou and McMullen (respectively) that highlights the important role of stakeholder relationships in entrepreneurial actualization (Bergman & McMullen, 2022; Ramoglou, Zyglidopoulos, & Papadopoulou, 2021).

COURSES OF ACTION AND SITUATED ORDINARY LANGUAGE

We also argue that additional light can be shed on the dynamics of "following course of action B" (Ramoglou & McMullen, 2022: 4). From an ordinary language perspective that is grounded in dialogue with a wide array of potential stakeholders, we see the possibility for conceptualizing a wider set of courses of action. Such potential courses of action can emerge from the variety of interactions that occur for an entrepreneur within their social environment. As Ramoglou and McMullen (2022) allude to, these interactions occur over time (Wood, Bakker, & Fisher, 2021). Accordingly we argue that dialogue between entrepreneurs and stakeholders will occur over a range of temporal periods, outcomes, and courses of action.

As Ramoglou and McMullen (2022: 26) suggest, ordinary language philosophy gets us to the notion of "entrepreneurial work" utilized to actualize an opportunity. But we suggest further that in using a dialogic approach, we also can explain dynamics in courses of action over longer periods of time (Wadhwani, Kirsch, Welter, Gartner, & Jones, 2020); as well as non-linear courses of action (Nair, Gaim, & Dimov, 2022). A dialogic approach to courses of action situated in ordinary language can help to better conceptualize how entrepreneurial work may extend, magnify, or be facilitated through the very dialogue used to actualize opportunities—that is, many opportunities over time and scope.

What is helpful about such a complementary focus on dialogue—as an explanation for the emergence of *extended* courses of action—is that it provides a justification for conceptualizing

entrepreneurial action as something greater than the interests of a focal individual. Dialogue helps us to understand more readily that entrepreneurial action is not an end in itself, but is dynamic, extended work that is not bounded by singular or static opportunities. The focus by Ramoglou and McMullen (2022) on entrepreneurial work thereby invites the examination of transformative action in its broader sense—as a form of collective, interactive activity through which projects emerge and evolve that may become more consequential in scope and over time than the initial actors may have supposed. Entrepreneurial work with broader focalization enabled by dialogue, thus provides foundation for understanding entrepreneurial projects with broader ambition.

NECESSARY CONDITIONS AND STREAMS OF DIALOGUE

We further argue that introducing a dialogic approach enables entrepreneurship scholars to observe how the context of entrepreneurial action is in fact socially situated in ordinary language as entrepreneurial *inter*action. Specifically, Ramoglou and McMullen (2022: 20) suggest, "for A to be possible by doing B, it is not one condition that must be real; instead, a set of conditions (C_1, $C_2 \ldots C_n$) must exist for desirable world-states to be possible." Our contention is that the "holistic understandings [that] (implicitly) underlie assertions of 'opportunity existence'" (Ramoglou & McMullen, 2022: 20) emerge through streams of dialogue with stakeholders. That is, it is the nature of dialogue in ordinary language, which entrepreneurs use in a socially situated context that is both action-oriented and distributed (Mitchell, Randolph-Seng, & Mitchell, 2011), that enables entrepreneurs to understand the necessary conditions C_1, $C_2 \ldots C_n$ that must exist. In this respect, a dialogic approach helps us to understand social context, and it foregrounds the streams of *inter*action that uncover necessary conditions to better understand entrepreneurial action as it relates to entrepreneurial opportunity. From this perspective of interaction in language, it might be that entrepreneurs adopt opportunity-focused language to communicate a set of potential actions

and conditions, because that is the ordinary language concept used and understood by their dialogue partners.

As we see it, then, Ramoglou and McMullen (2022) build on a broad tradition in entrepreneurship research focused on the nature of the action involved in the pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunities (Alvarez & Barney, 2010; Berglund, Bousfiha, & Mansoori, 2020; Dimov, 2011; McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Wright & Phan, 2020). Their introduction of the concept of entrepreneurial work offers a helpful perspective on how desirable states of the world are both made possible and are actualized. Through this concept of entrepreneurial work Ramoglou and McMullen (2022) begin to address conceptual confusion around the term opportunity. What we see as missing in their description of entrepreneurial work, which "captures the complex array of cognitive, behavioral, and organizational processes" (2022: 31), is an explicit theorization of the interactive and relational processes of such work that are required to foster the mutual confidence of entrepreneurs and stakeholders in an entrepreneurial project (Mitchell et al., 2021). A dialogic approach highlights how confidence, and the associated actualization of a desirable world state, can also be constituted through, for example, processes of consensus building among entrepreneurs and potential stakeholders (Wood & McKinley, 2010). In this respect, a dialogic approach expands thinking and language from being action oriented in a given context, to being *inter*action oriented in that socially-situated context (cf. Mitchell et al., 2011). The concept of entrepreneurial work put forward by Ramoglou and McMullen (2022) thus has the potential to encompass explicitly such interactive and relational processes.

CONCLUSION

It is non-controversial that language matters, especially in terms of social interaction. Hence we argue that, through a dialogic approach, ordinary language philosophy can be even better

applied in entrepreneurship research. We also suggest that this dialogic approach points the way toward the use of ordinary language in the broader domain of management and organization theory research. Specifically this approach, by focusing additional attention on the interactive nature of ordinary language in the contexts of entrepreneurial action, helps to demonstrate how ordinary language philosophy can be constituted in theory and in practice. Yes, working theories emerge in practice in the form of ordinary language. Part of our job, though, is understanding not only these theories, but also developing them to become more systematic through dialogue.

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