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Carnival in the company: Organisational norms and their subversion in team meetings

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In organisations, norms are introduced in order to standardise, economise and improve working processes and product quality. This normative organisation of work emerges in processes of quality management, is fixed in organisational charts and written documents, and concerns technical and communicative processes as well as language use. Referring to a corpus of team meetings in one French and one Spanish subsidiary of a multinational company the contribution focuses on how participants deal with such norms and standards when they work or talk about work. The analysis is a continuation of a broader micro-analytic study on the role of language variation in talk at work (Thörle 2005, Müller 2006). It concentrates on cases where the orientation to norms turns out to be problematic or contradictory and has to be negotiated by participants. In those situations, participants display their attitudes towards the organisational norms by using particular communicative genres and language styles. It will be shown that attitudes towards norms – their explanation, their defence as well as the sometimes carnivalesque subversion of rules and procedures – represent a resource for constructing collective identities within the organisation.

Müller, Andreas P. (2006): Sprache und Arbeit. Aspekte einer Ethnografie der Unternehmenskommunikation. Tübingen: Narr.

Thörle, Britta (2005): Fachkommunikation im Betrieb. Interaktionsmuster und berufliche Identität in französischen Arbeitsbesprechungen. Tübingen: Narr (Forum für Fachsprachenforschung).