



Discourse Analysis of Japanese “Black Companies”

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Abstract

Issues concerning *Black Companies* have been extensively discussed in Japan recently. This paper aims to understand how discourses on *Black Companies* have been constructed and altered within the Japanese social context. To achieve this, we conducted discourse analysis using the case of Dentsu Inc., focusing especially on the multi-levels of discourse and power relations. We find that the process of power emergence in *Black Companies* and of values relating to the ethic of hard work on the part of employees relate to three levels of discourse: micro-discourse, meso-discourse and macro-discourse. This paper contributes to discourse studies by establishing that one discourse emerges under the influence of other discourses. As a practical contribution, this finding will assist those struggling with injustices in their organisation by enabling them to change their difficult situations via involvement with various discourses.

Keywords: Black Company, Discourse, Labour relations, Long working hours, Power

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Introduction

Recently, companies that drive their employees into mental illness, including suicide, by overwork and harassment have been criticised by the Japanese society. These companies are called *Black Companies*. In the Japanese context, the word 'black' does not relate to racial discrimination but rather, to concepts of illegality, evil and darkness. In this paper, we use the term *Black Company* because it is in common usage among Japanese workers. *Black Companies* have become a significant social problem in Japan. Since 2012, The Most Evil Corporations Award Committee, which consists of lawyers, university professors, writers and others, select a *Black Company* and give it the "Most Evil Corporation of the Year" award. This award is well-known in Japan.

A distinctive feature of the *Black Company* problem is that even graduates of top universities are exploited by companies. Takahashi, Yotsumoto, Takagi, and Nakanishi (2017) pointed out that, generally, worker exploitation occurs in developing regions and in countries with cheap labour, inadequate legislation and no visible career paths, as typified by sweatshops. *Black Companies*, however, are characterised by the fact that even university graduates are driven to mental illness, including suicide, by overwork and certain kinds of harassment (Takahashi et al., 2017). This problem has shocked the Japanese society because of cases in which new workers, who had graduated from elite universities, committed suicide due to overwork. The Japanese government is taking this problem seriously and is implementing policies aimed at improving the working environment.

The phenomenon of companies forcing their employees to overwork and driving workers into mental illness and death is known as 'karoshi'. Although this phenomenon has existed for a long time, it has recently been recognised as a social problem. A discourse on *Black Companies* has emerged following a worker's suicide at Dentsu Inc. in 2015. In short, while the problems of *Black Companies* have previously been ignored and/or considered as unimportant issues, since this suicide, the government, companies and the general population in Japan have come to regard these problems as important.

This paper aims to understand the formation and development process of the discourse on *Black Companies* by clarifying how power relations among multiple levels of discourse are influenced by other levels of discourse, by analysing a particular social problem. To understand why this problem has occurred in Japan, it is necessary to understand relationships between discourses and power relations. The

original contribution of this paper is to analyse the problem of *Black Companies* from the viewpoint of organisational studies. For clarification, we conducted discourse analysis of the process of the formation of a *Black Company*. In particular, we focused on discursive dissonance among three levels of discourse: micro-discourse, meso-discourse and macro-discourse. Levels of discourse have not been sufficiently considered in previous studies (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). However, considering these levels of discourse, it is possible to understand power relations through discourse duplication. This study makes both academic and practical contributions.

Herein, we provide a case study of the Japanese company Dentsu Inc. Dentsu is the largest advertising corporation in Japan. We focus primarily on large corporations in Japan rather than smaller companies, and discuss the issue of *Black Companies* from theoretical, power and discourse perspectives. Our discussion contributes to a better understanding of the process of *Black Company* creation in Japan and proposes a new model for identifying the relationship between power and discourse using discourse analysis.

This paper is organised as follows. Our discussion starts by defining a *Black Company* and explains the issues pertaining to it through a literature review. We review studies on ‘power’ from the viewpoint of the relationship between discourse and power because we consider that issues pertaining to a *Black Company* are related to topics on discourse and power. We note that research to date has emphasised that the ‘discourse’ concept has several levels, and that there is a close relationship between power and discourse. However, research has ignored the construction of power relations through interactions between the multiple levels of discourse. Thus, the process of constructing power relations through interactions among discourses is proposed as a model. Then, we introduce the case of suicide at Dentsu and analyse it using our model. Finally, we conclude the paper by identifying a discourse on the process of power emergence in *Black Companies* and the values related to workers’ diligence, confirming the academic and practical contributions of this paper, and identifying future directions of research on *Black Companies* and ‘organisational discourse’.

Literature Review

Background to “Black Companies” in Japan

Konno (2013) notes that *Black Companies* are mainly characterised by two factors: long working hours and low wages. On the other hand, the Most Evil Corporations Award Committee (n.d.) states that,

(1) Companies which are against the law include the labour law or companies which compel their employees to work intentionally and/or arbitrarily even though their working condition is possible to violate the law. (2) Companies which have the habit to force their employees to work with the usual practice to resort to violence on their employees called power harassment.

As a result of working in these companies, workers become both physically and mentally ill, sometimes leading to death by overwork – a phenomenon known as “karoshi” – or suicide due to mental disorders (see. Konno, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015) . Most executive-level managers, however, do not pay much heed to these issues (Most Evil Corporations Award Committee, 2013). Behind this situation are the unique values and management systems of Japanese corporations, while the root of the problem is identifiable in the social structure of Japan. The Japanese management system contributed to the development of the Japanese economy in the years following World War II. Consequently, many Japanese managers did not believe it to be incorrect to manage their employees in the manner of a *Black Company* and regarded complaints about hardship as something stemming from the emotional weakness of employees.

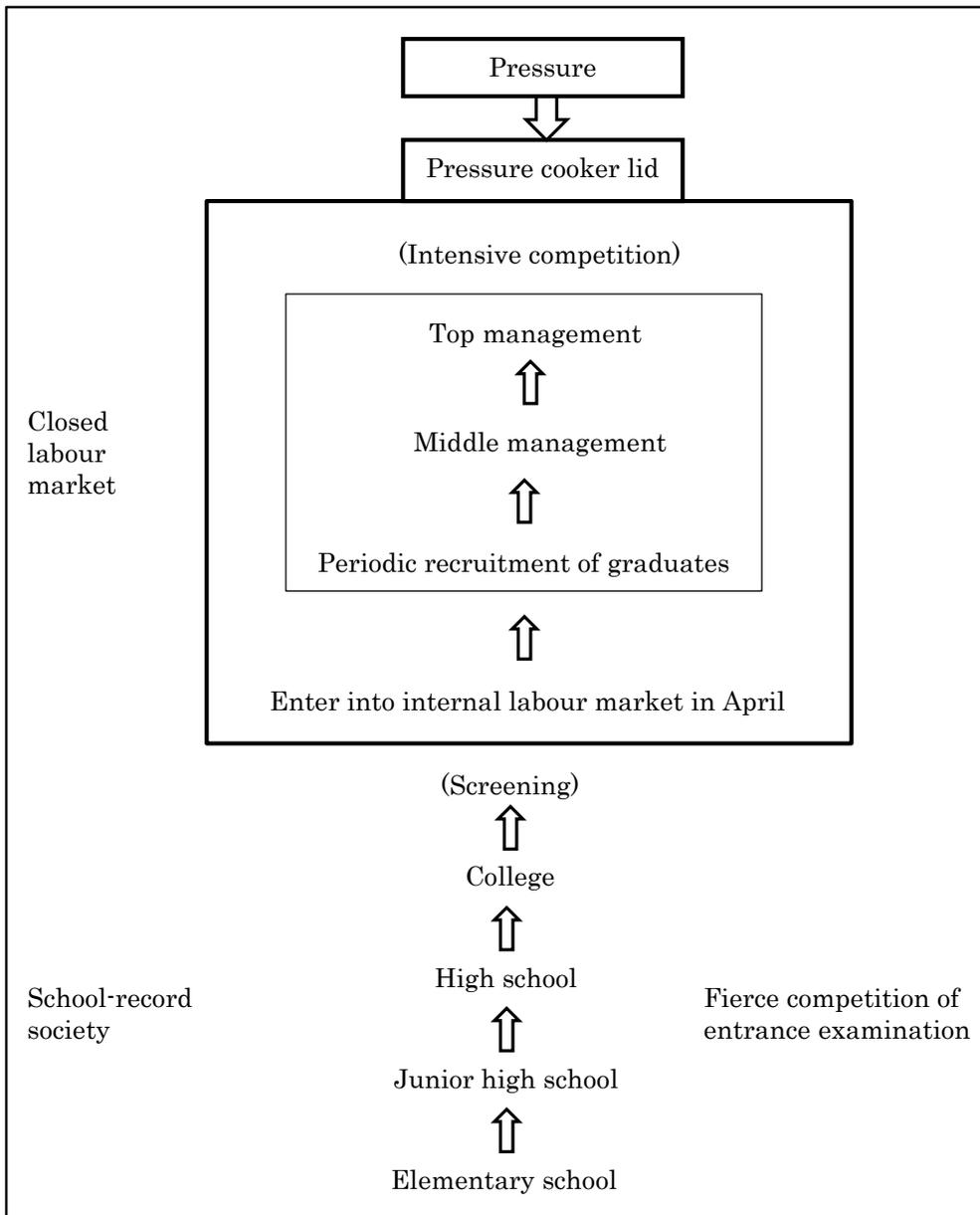
Drawing on Japanese-style management practices, we clarify the unique corporate management problems of *Black Companies* through an examination of a case study using discourse analysis derived from the competitive principles of Japanese corporations, the structures of Japanese academically-oriented society and the strategic rhetoric of *Black Companies*. Japanese management systems can be summarised in terms of systematic, cultural and psychological, behavioural and organisational characteristics. Systematic characteristics include: (1) bulk recruitment of new graduates in April, (2) long-term employment, (3) seniority systems, (4) company unions, (5) personnel transfers and (6) corporate education and training. Cultural and psychological characteristics include: (1) views on employee abilities (emphasis on latent abilities; long-term application of individual abilities), (2) full involvement in the working life of employees and (3) strength of employees’ sense of belonging (homogeneous effect) and creation of difference. Behavioural characteristics can be explained by: (1) shared roles and flexibility, (2) distinction between “us” (internal) and “them” (external) and (3) collectivism. Finally, organisational characteristics may include, as indicated in Ouchi’s (1981) “Theory Z”: (1) organic organisations, (2) collective decision-making (consensus building and the ‘ringi’ system) and collective responsibility (Otsuki, Takahashi, & Yamaguchi, 2008).

The social context of an academically-oriented society and its related discourse constitutes part of the background of Japanese-style management practices. The problem of long working hours at *Black Companies* refers to the excessive workload undertaken by people who were successful in the highly competitive recruitment examinations or who work at so-called top-tier companies listed in the first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange. These excessive workloads have resulted in some of these people being driven to suicide. It may be asked, “Why don’t they quit their positions before reaching such extremes?” but, unfortunately, the situation is not so simple. The factors at play here include the different values placed on labour practices and lifestyles by managers who experienced the management systems of Japan as “corporate warriors”, new and young employees from the so-called Generations X and Y, and differences in the dominant discourses associated with both groups. In other words, there is discord between discourse that emerged from a period of modernism that prioritised post-war reconstruction and economic and material wealth above all else, and a postmodern discourse reflective of the diverse values held by a generation that, while economically and materially well-off, experienced the lost decades after the collapse of the bubble economy. This discursive dissonance, the unique structures of Japan’s academically-oriented society, and Japanese-style management practices have each become entangled with corporate management systems, leading to the problem of *Black Companies*. This has become a serious social issue because of the large number of unfortunate incidents where people felt they had no other choice but to commit suicide because of sheer exhaustion and feeling trapped in situations where they felt unable to quit. Such are the consequences of working in a high-pressure corporate environment characterised by excessive workloads and competition due to the structure of Japan’s academically-oriented society.

Many Japanese management theories have examined Japanese economic development in the 1980s and the world-wide successes of Japanese companies. Hazama (1964, 1971, 1978, 1989), Tsuda (1977, 1981), Mito (1991a, 1991b) and Iwata (1977, 1980) are well-known studies of Japanese management. Iwata (1977, 1980) referred to the structure of Japan’s academically-oriented society, which is very important to understand the character of *Black Companies*. According to Iwata (1977), Japan’s academically-oriented society is structured from elementary school to university by very competitive conditions. Japanese young people study for entrance into top universities, which is a prerequisite for obtaining good jobs at top Japanese companies (Figure 1).

Japanese universities are ranked from top to bottom. Japanese young people are dominated by the thinking that one cannot obtain good jobs at top Japanese companies, and thereby achieve lifelong success and security, if they do not enter top universities.

Figure 1: Iwata (1980) Model



Source: Takahashi et al. (2017, p. 11)

Bulk recruitment of new graduates in April, long-term employment and seniority systems maintain the structure of Japan's academically-oriented system. This system is rigid and very competitive because bulk recruitment of new graduates in April restricts outside access to the Japanese labour market, and long-term employment and seniority systems shut out newcomers from entering the top companies.

These Japanese management systems limit employee turnover among Japanese top companies and confine Japanese employees within one company in very difficult, competitive conditions until their retirement. It is almost impossible for a retired employee from a top company to obtain a new job; he has little choice except a new job in a small or mid-sized company, and in worse working conditions. The large differences in working conditions between top companies and small and mid-sized companies are not limited to wage levels but also include fringe benefits.

Long-term employment and seniority systems are the pressure cookers that keep employees in a Japanese company. The secret of a Japanese company's power is extreme competition and powerful motivation systems that are used to screen good workers from bad workers over a long timeframe.

Around 40 years ago, during a period of strong economic growth in Japan in the 1950s and 60s, long working hours were the normal practice at many companies. This can be seen in a discourse exemplified by slogans such as "work is good" and "corporate warriors", as well as a commercial asking whether potential recruits can fight 24 hours a day. Although there was the social problem of long working hours, as well as deaths from overwork during this period, these were not treated as major issues. *Black Companies* came to be identified as a major social problem because of changes in Japan's social context and the dominant discourse of the period, and because of changes in the awareness of workers regarding working practices and lifestyles and in the dominant discourse on work within Japanese society. There have been changes in people's values regarding quality of life and ideas about work, as well as an emerging discourse that encourages these changes in Japan now that the country has attained high economic growth and become a wealthy nation.

In this section, we provide the background from which *Black Companies* emerged. The Japanese business climate has generated many *Black Companies* and, at the same time, *Black Companies* and hard-working employees within them have energised the Japanese economy.

We note that this phenomenon is closely related to the concept of 'power'. In general terms, some workers in *Black Companies* seek to 'escape' their company when they have been forced to overwork. In the case that this paper is analysing, the employee chose suicide as the escape route. This entails that *Black Companies* and their ideology have the power to force their workers to overwork. Our focus was on clarifying the emergence of *Black Companies* in Japan using discourse analysis to focus on the concept of power. The following section explains the concept of discourse and power and their relationship.

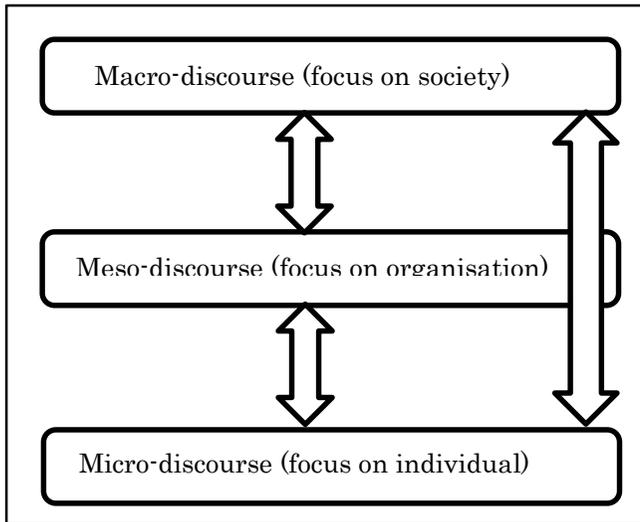
The Process of Constructing Power Relations through Interactions among Discourses

Power has been studied from the perspective of discourse by scholars who have been inspired by Foucault's studies, especially the 1998 article (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). They focus on the process of how power is constructed by language and communication. Although conventional studies of organisations consider language as a mirror reflecting reality, the study of discourse emphasises that language constructs social reality (such as power relations) (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

Discourse can be defined as a "structured collections of texts, and associated practices of textual production, transmission and consumption located in a historical and social context" (Hardy & Phillips, 2004, p. 300). Organisational discourse can be divided into three levels for analysis (Figure 2): (1) micro-discourse (focused on interactions among people), (2) meso-discourse (focused on the organisational level) and (3) macro-discourse (focused on broader institutions and society) (Boje, Osrick, & Ford, 2004). These levels influence each other.

This study uses Foucault's concept of power. Conventionally, researchers perceive that power is exercised by a person who has power over those who do not have power. According to Foucault (1998), on the other hand, power "is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian relations" (Foucault, 1998, p. 94). Therefore, the study of power "requires research and theory that examines how communication practices construct identities, experiences and ways of knowing that serve some interests over others" (Mumby, 2001, p. 614). For these reasons, recent studies concerning power focus on language, which is an important element of communication.

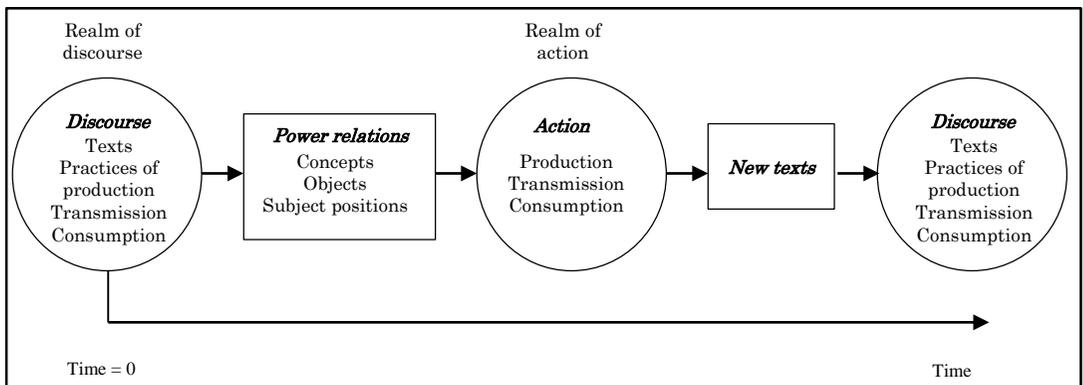
Figure 2: The Levels of Discourse



Source: Based on Boje et al. (2004)

Hardy and Phillips (2004) argued that neither discourse nor power takes precedence over the other and that both act together (Figure 3). They argue that power is based on existing discourse. On the other hand, the actions of organisational actors produce new text that is defined as “a manifestation of discourse and the discursive ‘unit’” (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004, p. 3). As new texts are added to the discourse, an entirely new discourse is constructed. In this manner, recent studies have shown that power is generated through the interaction between discourse and action.

Figure 3: The Relationship between Power and Discourse



Source: Hardy and Phillips (2004, p. 305)

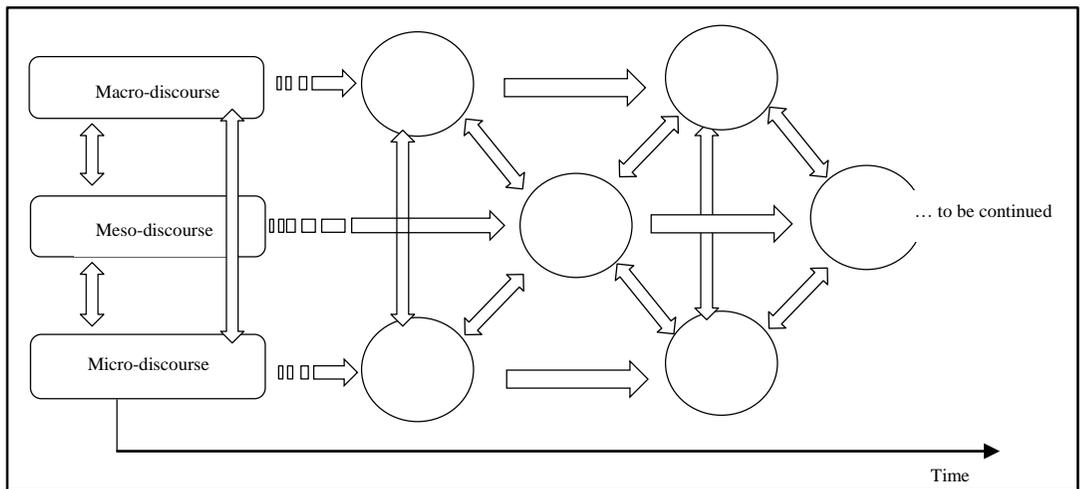
There are limitations to the work of Hardy and Phillips (2004) and Boje et al. (2004). The model of Hardy and Phillips (2004) indicates that meso-discourse has an interconfigurational relationship with power, which influences the internal organisation. However, this model does not sufficiently explain other levels of power relations outside of the meso-discourse. As noted above, there are three levels for analysing discourse, depending on the level of analysis: micro-discourse, meso-discourse and macro-discourse. On the other hand, while ideas on the levels of discourse presented by Boje et al. (2004) contribute to our understanding of the attributes and constituents of the concept of discourse, their ideas do not address the relationship between time and the formation of a discourse or the power struggles among levels of discourse and the formation of power relations. It is, therefore, important to combine the ideas of Hardy and Phillips (2004) and Boje et al. (2004) to clarify the process of the construction of power relations between micro-discourse, meso-discourse and macro-discourse among individuals and within organisations and society.

We have constructed a model for the formation of power relations and interactions among the three levels of discourse (Figure 4). 'Macro-discourse', 'meso-discourse' and 'micro-discourse' correspond to 'a discourse in a society', 'that in an organisation' and 'that of individuals', respectively. Bidirectional arrows in Figure 4 indicate the interactions between two discourse levels. As Boje et al. (2004) noted, each discourse influences other discourses. While a level of discourse can strengthen another level of discourse, multiple levels of discourses can conflict. Here, discursive dissonance is defined as disagreements among discourse levels. These interactions can form power relations. Unidirectional arrows in Figure 4 show the process of change of each level of discourse. As Hardy and Phillips (2004) stated, power relations continuously change through discourse. In this paper, we attempt to describe the interactions between the three levels of discourse at *Black Companies* and clarify the process of constructing power that forces employees to overwork. The purpose of this paper was to clarify how various levels of discourse and power relations construct each other through a case study of Dentsu Inc.

Hardy and Phillips (2004) studied how new texts and discourses reinforce power relationships through the production, transmission and consumption of discourse. However, researchers have not yet attained sufficient understanding of how organisational members are controlled by actions and interpretations that are embedded in discourses and power relations. Hardy & Phillips (2004) claim that the interrelationship between discourse and power is a complex and relatively under-

theorised area of research and that further research is needed to tease out these dynamics (Hardy & Phillips, 2004, p. 313). To understand this issue, research on micro-discourses and macro-discourses involving organisational members are needed. Furthermore, we must understand how meso-discourse is modified by macro-discourse. This paper provides insight into the modification of power relations through the reproduction of discourses that involve three levels of discourse and power relations.

Figure 4: The Process of Constructing Power Relations through the Interactions among Discourses



Source: Based on Boje et al. (2004) and Hardy and Phillips (2004)

Methodology and the Case

Drawing on Japanese-style management practices, we clarify Japan's unique corporate management problem of *Black Companies* and elucidate how the discourse of common knowledge about working in Japanese companies has been constructed, through an examination of a case study. For this, we shall use discourse analysis relating to the competitive principles of Japanese corporations, the structures of Japan's academically-oriented society and the strategic rhetoric of *Black Companies*.

We took a case study approach for this research because this method can be used to clarify the reasons for, and describe the processes of, a particular phenomenon. Because this paper aimed to clarify the process of power emergence through interactions among the three levels of macro-discourse, meso-discourse and micro-discourse relating to *Black Companies*, it is beneficial to use a case study constructed from conversations of survivors, newspaper articles and other sources of information.

We analyse discourse on *Black Companies* through interactions among three levels of discourse. In this section, macro-discourse indicates the social context that has been influential in forming *Black Companies* and generating overworked employees. This context includes high economic growth, the bubble economy and the lost two decades. Meso-discourse can be considered as emanating from the *Black Company* itself. In this paper, we focus on the Dentsu case. Therefore the origin, situation, incident and other issues concerning Dentsu are included in the meso-discourse. Micro-discourse indicates the individual level of discourse and includes workers' behaviour, values, thoughts, actions and other aspects of their work and lifestyle.

We begin this section with an explanation of the incident at Dentsu that is considered herein as a 'meso-discourse'. This incident was the beginning of our research interest, after which the *Black Company* concept was spotlighted and heavily discussed in academic circles and in practical contexts.

A young female Dentsu employee committed suicide in December 2015 as a consequence of the long working hours and power harassment she experienced at the company. She began working at Dentsu in April 2015. This company is identified as a *Black Company* since her suicide. The Japanese mass media reports that Dentsu has very strict working principles, referred to as "Oni-Jyu-Soku" (Dentsu's 10 Working Principles) and that these guidelines have created a situation whereby many of its employees work in a very difficult environment. These principles dictate the spirit and way of thinking about tasks that are dominant in the company. Oni-Jyu-Soku is based on the ideas of employees who have worked at Dentsu since 1951. It was written by Hideo Yoshida, the fourth CEO of Dentsu, who greatly contributed not only to the company but also to the entire Japanese advertising industry. This principal and his philosophy are inherited for a long time by an in-company training for staffs (Takano & Ouchi, 2016). Such principles have long been considered something of significant value not only by employees of the company but also by many managers at other Japanese corporations.

Oni-Jyu-Soku (Dentsu's 10 Working Principles)

1. Create projects on your own instead of waiting for work to be assigned.
2. Always take the initiative on your projects. Do not wait for directions.
3. Search for large and complex challenges. Small and trivial projects will debase you.

4. Tackle difficult assignments. Progress only lies in accomplishing a difficult mission.
5. Never give up on your task. Treat it as if it was your own life, with the utmost determination and responsibility.
6. Lead by example. Leading rather than being led makes a huge difference in the long run.
7. Set long-term goals. With the right amount of effort, patience and creativity, they will bring hope for the future.
8. Be confident. Confidence will give your work edge, persistence and boldness.
9. Keep your head up and your eyes wide open. Never drop your guard, even for a moment. This is the nature of providing service.
10. Embrace confrontation. If you don't, you will regret it. Confrontation is the mother of progress and the source of aggressive entrepreneurship.

Yoshida Hideo Memorial Foundation (n.d.)

In the context of the period of high economic growth in Japan, long working hours were a normal practice at many companies, as evidenced in the discourse exemplified by slogans such as “work is good” and “corporate warriors”, as well as in a commercial by Daiichi Sankyo Healthcare Co. Ltd. that asked whether potential recruits could fight 24 hours a day (Daiichi Sankyo Healthcare Co. Ltd., n.d.). Although there was the social problem of long working hours, as well as deaths from overwork during this period, these were not treated as major issues. In fact, Dentsu had grown, riding on a wave of Japanese economic growth with Oni-Jyu-Soku, the guideline assisted fostering of the culture of long working hours (Takano & Ouchi, 2016). Currently, Dentsu is the largest advertising agency in Japan, and is the fifth-largest advertising agency network in the world, in terms of revenue. During this growth period, the working guidelines that may have led workers to overwork are considered to constitute one of the factors responsible for the growth not only of the company but also of the success of members in the organisation who were promoted.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, the Japanese economy continued to grow, although there were exceptions, such as the 1970s economic downturn due to the oil crisis. After the collapse of the financial bubble in the 1990s, the Japanese society experienced a period of long-term economic slowdown called the “lost two decades”. Naturally, Japanese companies and the government suffered economic damage. Not only company managers but also many individuals in Japan lost confidence and hope for the future. A number of values associated with Japanese life changed during the

lost two decades. People came to value mental satisfaction over economic and material wealth. On the other hand, the corporate culture and customs were inherited historically in the form of Japan’s original management practices, which are rooted in, and maintained by, business activities. Managers and administrators who experienced Japanese-style management practices during the high-growth period, when they first joined their companies, worked within a dominant discourse of modernity that sought economic growth and material wealth. However, recent new employees and those who did not experience the high-growth period have a work ethic that is fundamentally different with regard to labour practices. This new ethic can be described in terms of a generation gap.

Table 1: Timeline of the Ms. Takahashi Case and Dentsu’s Reactions

Time	Event
March 2015	Ms. Takahashi graduates from the University of Tokyo
April 2015	Ms. Takahashi enters Dentsu
May 2015	Ms. Takahashi moves to a house provided by the company
November 2015	Ms. Takahashi asks her boss to reduce her workload
December 25 th 2015	Ms. Takahashi commits suicide
September 30 th 2016	Approval of the case appropriate for Industrial Accident Compensation
November 1 st 2016	Dentsu establishes the “Dentsu Work Environment Reform Committee”
December 9 th 2016	Dentsu decides to delete “Oni-Jyu-Soku” from the employee handbook
December 28 th 2016	Dentsu and Ms. Takahashi’s boss are referred to the public prosecutor’s office for breach of Labour Standard Law by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare
	Mr. Ishii, the CEO of Dentsu, resigns

Source: Based on the Asahi daily newspaper (Chiba, 2016, October 8; Editorial Department of Asahi, 2016, December 10; Chiba & Waki, 2016, December 29) and Imanishi (2017).

Ms. Takahashi’s suicide at Dentsu is an example that reveals the generation gap in values within *Black Companies*. Dentsu is a highly sought after company for Japanese university graduates. Ms. Takahashi, a Dentsu employee who was 24 years old at the time, committed suicide on December 25, 2015. Table 1 shows the timeline of the case and includes Dentsu’s reactions.

Discourse analysis of this case makes it possible to examine the power relations between those who wield control and those who are controlled in the workplace. In this case, we plot the discourse relating to the Japanese society in four ways: as macro-discourse, the discourse of Dentsu, especially the discourse involving Oni-Jyu-Soku, as meso-discourses, and the discourse of Japanese individuals. We analyse the power-constructing process through interactions among these three levels of discourse. This study contributes to the understanding of those discourses that emerge in daily interactions between members in an organisation. We hope that this analysis will help people who are struggling with injustices generated by power relations in their organisations.

Analysis

In this section, we analyse the case using the analytic framework of the process of constructing power relations through interactions among discourses. First, the macro-discourse level is described because the discourse relating to Japanese society and *Black Companies* includes the Japanese economic situation, the social context of *Black Companies* and social and general values of individual workers. To describe the macro-discourse, we introduce processes behind the Japanese economic situation and some studies about Japanese management. Second, the meso-discourse of *Black Companies* is described as the discourse relating to Oni-Jyu-Soku at Dentsu and the transition from Oni-Jyu-Soku. Oni-Jyu-Soku is the way and manner of work at Dentsu, of which workers are instructed to be very conscious. Finally, the level of micro-discourse is described in terms of the individual values of employees in a *Black Company* and their approach to working long hours, their work–life balance and other aspects. After describing each of the three levels of discourse, we analyse the interactions among the levels and clarify the process of power emergence in a *Black Company*.

In our analysis, the process of power emergence in this Black Company can be divided into two phases: the first is the phase in which Oni-Jyu-Soku was powerful and the second is the phase in which Oni-Jyu-Soku had lost its power not only in Dentsu but also in the Japanese society.

The first phase is described in Figure 5. This figure shows the processes by which the power of Oni-Jyu-Soku was strengthened. From the 1960s to 1990s, the Japanese economy continued to grow strongly. During this phase, not only business people but

also academics worldwide, had recognised the Japanese management system as being better and more efficient than that of other countries. For example, Abegglen (1958) stated that the Japanese management system consists of three parts: the long-term employment system, the seniority-based wage system and companies' unions. At that time, Oni-Jyu-Soku was proposed by Dentsu, which enjoyed economic success as a result of it. At the same time, at the individual level in Japan, workers considered it critically important to work for their company as long as possible. Because large companies in Japan have long-term employment systems and seniority-based wage systems, the longer the workers belonged to their company, the more money they would receive and the higher the positions they could achieve. The power of Oni-Jyu-Soku was strengthened through these interactions among the three levels of discourse. While principles such as Oni-Jyu-Soku were critically important factors for the continuation of growth at the societal and organisational levels, at the individual level many Japanese considered that as long as they followed Oni-Jyu-Soku, their efforts would never go unrewarded. Thus, the individual employees in large companies in Japan were willing to follow the guidelines of Oni-Jyu-Soku. At the same time, it became difficult for employees to change jobs to work for better companies.

The second phase is described in Figure 6. This figure shows the processes by which Oni-Jyu-Soku has lost power, not only at Dentsu but also within Japanese society, through discursive dissonance. After the collapse of the financial bubble in the 1990s, the Japanese society experienced the "lost two decades". Under these circumstances, societal values underwent significant changes. At the same time, at the individual level, those people, particularly the millennial generation in Japan, who were educated under a "pressure-free" environment, came to prioritise mental welfare over economic growth. Nevertheless, at the organisational level, Dentsu retained Oni-Jyu-Soku. Here, there was dissonance between macro-discourse and meso-discourse and between meso-discourse and micro-discourse. While the older workers in a large company such as Dentsu recognised work principles such as Oni-Jyu-Soku as a way to develop not only their company but also themselves, the young, millennial workers largely considered such hard-working principles to be meaningless, useless and incompatible with their values. In the case of Ms. Takahashi, she had encountered difficulties with her boss concerning her workload. According to Oni-Jyu-Soku Principle No. 5, Dentsu employees never give up on their tasks. The persons and organisations who considered economic welfare to be of great importance, such as her boss and Dentsu, aimed to follow this principle. For the millennial generation in Japan, who regarded mental welfare to be more important than economic and material

Figure 5: The Process whereby the Power of Meso-Discourse as “Oni-Jyu-Soku” was Strengthened (1960s–1990s)

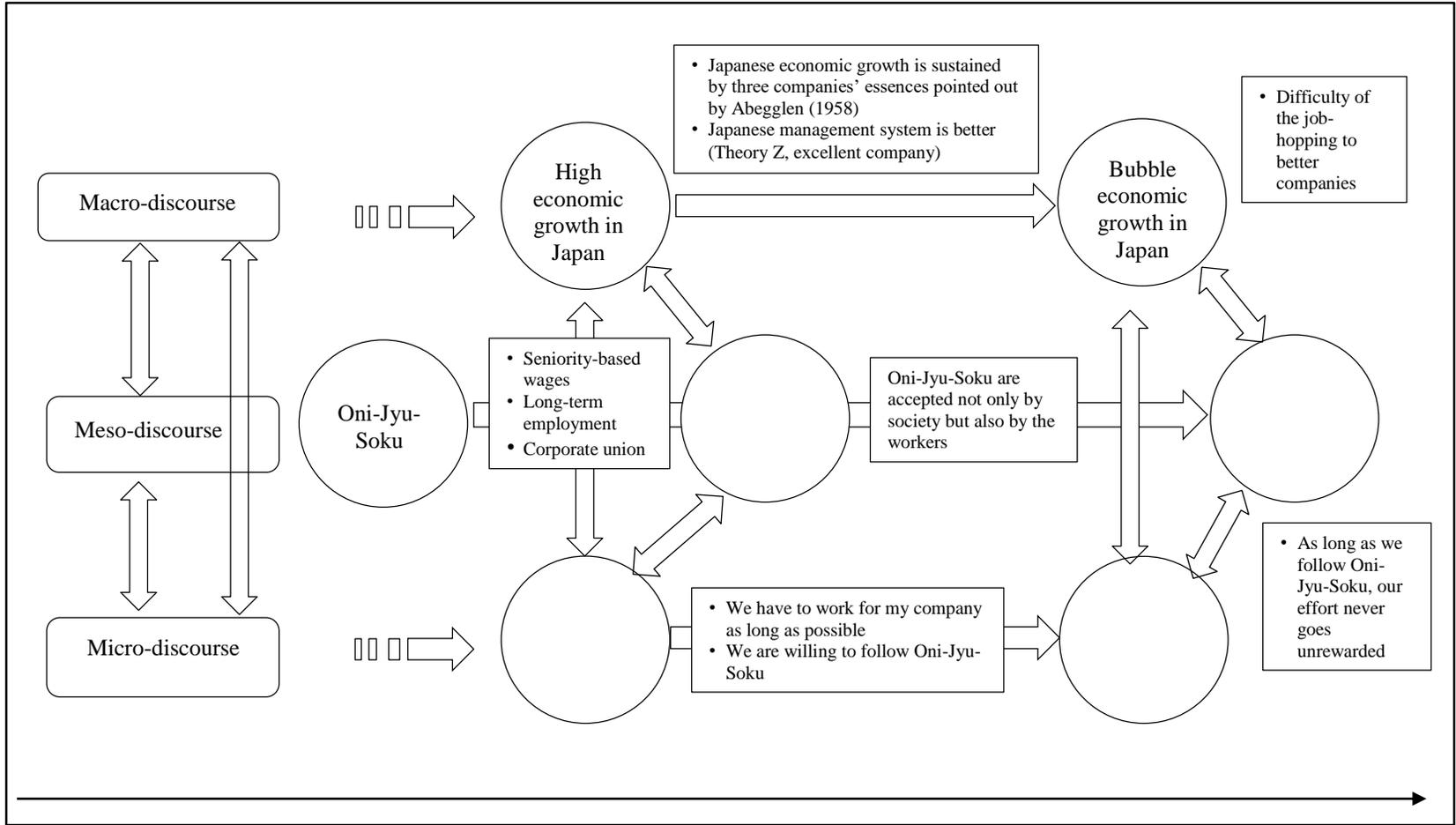
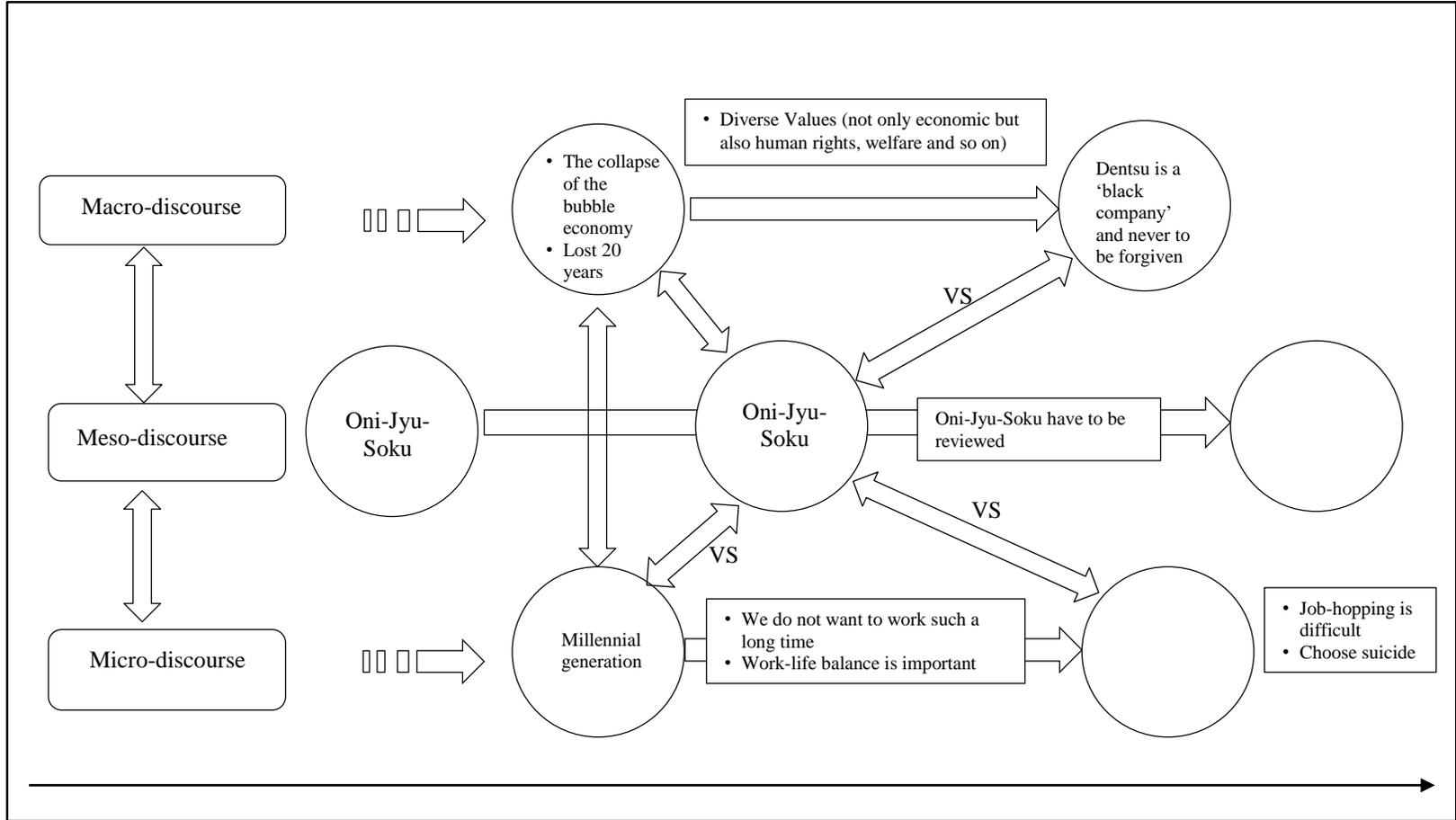


Figure 6: The Process whereby the Power of Meso-Discourse as “Oni-Jyu-Soku” was Lost (1990s-the present)



welfare, this was not a principle that they were comfortable following. Discursive dissonance occurred between the discourse participated in by Ms. Takahashi and the discourse associated with Dentsu. As mentioned in the first phase, because of the Japanese management style, changing companies to obtain better jobs is difficult for young workers in Japan. If they do not like their jobs, they have only two choices: persevere in their unsatisfactory positions or move to other jobs in lower-ranked companies. In Ms. Takahashi's case, she could not accept either option.

One of the most influential newspapers in Japan, Asahi Shimbun, revealed Oni-Jyu-Soku to the public after her death. The Japanese society, including the Japanese media, have criticised Oni-Jyu-Soku and have blamed it for Ms. Takahashi's suicide. Here, another discursive dissonance is evident. In the Japanese society, because the lost two decades resulted in changes in many values, many people now think that no-one should force their values and principles upon others. They criticised Dentsu and Ms. Takahashi's boss for forcing Oni-Jyu-Soku on Ms. Takahashi. While Dentsu and some members in Dentsu thought that Oni-Jyu-Soku could promote the development of the company and benefit them personally, the Japanese society at large considered Oni-Jyu-Soku as a hindrance to the pursuit of happiness. The Japanese society, represented by the mass media, labelled Dentsu as a *Black Company*. Finally, Dentsu decided to delete "Oni-Jyu-Soku" from the employee handbook. Dentsu and Ms. Takahashi's boss were referred to the public prosecutor's office for breach of Labour Standard Law by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Editorial Department of Asahi, 2016, December 10/December 29).

In this section, we discuss the processes through which Oni-Jyu-Soku became a powerful set of principles and subsequently lost that power. Our approach uses the analysis of discursive dissonance among three levels of discourse. In the first phase, the three levels of discourse shared familiar values that focused on economic growth and the Japanese management style. There was, therefore, no remarkable discursive dissonance with regard to Oni-Jyu-Soku. The emergence of discursive dissonance in relation to Oni-Jyu-Soku occurred in the second phase, due to changing values in the Japanese society and among Japanese people. This discursive dissonance reduced the power of Oni-Jyu-Soku. At the same time, this discursive dissonance led to Dentsu becoming identified as a *Black Company*.

Findings and Discussion

By analysing this *Black Company* case, we have explored the process of power emergence within the company and values relating to working hard on the part of

employees, and identified three levels of discourse: micro-discourse, meso-discourse and macro-discourse. It is evident from our analysis that power relations in an organisation are constructed not only by micro-discourse and meso-discourse and actions but also by macro-discourse. In the case of Dentsu, interactions among the three levels of discourse were critical to the creation of new discourses and work practices, in contrast with the model proposed by Hardy and Phillips (2004).

This paper contributes to the study of discourse and power. In addition to its academic contribution, our research also makes a practical contribution. The strategic impact of organisational power relations can be determined via the various discourses described above. This might help those struggling with injustices generated by power relations within their organisations.

In this article, we analyse the case of Dentsu – a Japanese advertising agency described as a *Black Company* – using discourse analysis. Our case study concerns a young, female employee in Dentsu who committed suicide under pressure from long working hours and power harassment, and whose relatives accepted compensation as ‘Industrial Accident Compensation’. Burdening employees with extreme workloads was normal practice during the period of Japanese economic growth, and acceptance of this practice is still ingrained in the Japanese society. Dentsu deployed the “Oni-Jyu-Soku” list of 10 principles to shape employees’ actions and attitudes, and many workers were inspired by it. These deeply rooted corporate cultures and customs still exist in Japanese management. However, Japanese workers’ attitudes toward their working style have changed such that workers – especially the younger generation – have now begun considering their lifestyle. This shows a turning point of the micro-discourse, which also affects macro-discourse. Additionally, this turn, and the suicide of the young, female worker at Dentsu, influenced meso-discourse. It was a trigger for the removal of Oni-Jyu-Soku from the Dentsu employee handbook.

A shift such as this makes it possible to understand power relations within the workplace. This study contributes to the understanding of how discourses interact, on a daily basis, among members in an organisation. This might help individuals who are struggling with injustices generated by power relations in their organisations.

Our case study has several limitations and issues. The first issue concerns bias caused by using secondary sources such as newspaper and magazine articles in the analysis. Such biases could include those of the various reporters, writers and journalists who have reported on the incident. For this reason, future studies should

use interviews to collect data and facilitate a better understanding of meso-discourse and micro-discourse. Second, although the title of this paper is ‘Discourse Analysis of Japanese “*Black Companies*”’, we address only the Dentsu case. However, there are many companies described as *Black Companies* in Japan, and even government workers are harmed by long working hours and other elements that define *Black Companies*. Added to this, the meaning of “*black*” has been expanded to include such terms as “*black part-time jobs*” (Ouchi, 2016) and “*black-club activities*” (Uchida, 2017). Our analysis should be extended to other “*black*” organisations and companies. Finally, although we conclude that discursive dissonance is harmful, it is not always detrimental to organisations. It can help organisations improve their practices, such as encouraging innovation based on diverse ways of thinking. To clarify the process of discursive dissonance in an organisation, the mechanisms of deviations on the part of organisational members need to be explored.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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