Demystifying talent management: A critical approach to the realities of talent

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Do we really know what the term "talent" in talent management means?
– and what could be the consequences of not knowing?

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Abstract

Over the centuries the term "talent" has changed semantically and slowly transformed itself into a floating signifier or become an accidental designator. The term "talent" no longer has one single meaning and a "referent" in real life, but instead a multiplicity of meaning and references to something beyond real life, something indefinite and indefinable. In other words, today we do not know specifically what the term "talent" in talent management really means or refers to. Indeed, this is problematical, because in late modernity the term "talent" has become a popular and frequently used key term among business consultants and, within the science of human resource management, a cornerstone in the discipline of "talent management", and not knowing what the term really means will turn any talent discussion, talent identification and talent recruitment into a question of subjectivity and belief in talent rather than objectivity and knowledge of talent.

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Introduction

When the western modern society went from being just a modern society to a late modern society in the 1980's, it went through a shift from being an industrial society – where important assets were machines, factories, and capitals – to an information or a knowledge society – where important assets became intellectual capital, knowledge, networks, and brands[2]. Due to these sociological changes the term talent also underwent a renaissance and became one of the key words or terms in the culture of late modernity. As Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod emphasized in their book *The War for Talent*, this development changed the requirements for the worker/employee because *"in 1900, only 17 percent of all jobs required knowledge workers; now over 60 per cent do."*[3]. The challenge for companies in the late modern society and labour market was now being able to recruit qualified talented workers/employees with enough knowledge to qualify for certain jobs. According to Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod, this development launched a war for the best knowledge workers or talents in our society:

"The war for talent began in the 1980's with the birth of the Information age. (…) More knowledge workers means it's more important to get great talent, since the differential value created by the most talented knowledge workers is enormous. The best software developers can write ten times more usable lines of code than average developers (….)[4]."

In the late 1990's, consultants and consultancy firms began paying attention to this new challenge and more specifically had their eye on the recruitment process of talents. Within a few years a new term, "talent management" (TM), was coined and a new market within human resource management was identified[5]. And even today, in the light of the current economic downturn and the volatile market environments, as highlighted by Meyers, Woerkom & Dries[6], *"(…) talent management has become an ever more important tool to gain a sustained competitive advantage through human capital."*[7]

But also in the academic world – although at a slower pace – researchers began paying attention to talent management and within a short while, talent management gained scientific acceptance as a new discrete (sub-

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[2] Adamsen (2004), Lyotard (1982), and Michaels (2001) refer to the radical sociological change from an industrial to an information society.
[3] Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod (2001): The War for Talent, pp:3
[4] Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod (2001): The War for Talent, pp:3
[5] Lewis & Heckman (2006): Talent management: A critical review. In Human Resource Management Review Volume 16, Issue 2, June 2006, Pages 139–154.
Andersen, Torben (2013): Nye perspektiver på talentledelse (Talent management in new perspectives) in Handbook for Human Resource Management pp:
[6] Meyers, M.C, Woerkom, M & Dries, N. (2013): Talent – Innate or acquired? Theoretical considerations and their implications for talent management. Article in press. In Human Resource Management Review 2013.PP
[7] Meyers, M.C, Woerkom, M & Dries, N. (2013): Talent – Innate or acquired? Theoretical considerations and their implications for talent management. Article in press. In Human Resource Management Review 2013.PP:

)field or management activity separated from (or sometimes opposed to) human resource management[8]. In his article *Talent management defined*, Andrew Paradise[9] sums up what researchers and consultants have said about what talent management is, and reaches – what he believes – is a common, general definition of talent management shared by most researchers and consultants:

"A holistic approach to optimizing human capital, which enables an organization to drive short- and long-term results by building culture, engagement, capability, and capacity through integrated talent acquisition, development, and deployment processes that are aligned to business goals.".[10]

Even though talent management today seems to be a recognized research (sub-)field, the term is rooted partly in both a consultant and scientific discourse and while some common, general (but also vague) definitions of talent management are broadly accepted, an increase in criticism seems to have emerged in recent years. Ashton & Morton[11], for instance, point out that they cannot find *"(…) a single consistent or concise definition of tm"[12]*, while Lewis & Heckman[13] also reviewed the literature focusing on talent management and found a disturbing fact:

"A review of the literature focused on talent management reveals a disturbing lack of clarity regarding the definition, scope and overall goals of talent management. (….) It is difficult to identify the meaning of "talent management" because of the confusion regarding definition and terms and the many assumptions made by authors who wrote about TM. The terms "talent management", "talent strategy", "succession management", and "human resource planning" are often used interchangeably."[14]

In addition to the general confusion about the term talent management and what it stands for, other researchers recently took their critical reflections one step further and began questioning the very meaning of the term "talent". Both Holden[15] and Tansley[16] ask themselves this simple question, do we today have any idea of or really know what the term "talent" in talent management means or directly refers too? In this context, it is a highly relevant question to ask, but before we get to their analysis and answer, let me first try to sum up what we, so far, in our everyday life and in science believe the meaning of talent is.

[8] McDonnell, Anthony, Lamare, Ryan & Gunnigle, Patrick (2010): Developing Tomorrow's Leaders – Evidence of Global Talent Management in Multinational Enterprises. In Journal of World Business Volume 45, Issue 2, April 2010, pp.: 150–160

Larsen, Henrik Holt (2012): Talent Management – perspektiver og dilemmaer. Samfundslitteratur. pp:

[9] Paradise, Andrew (2009): Talent management defined. Training and Development. May 2009

[10] Paradise, Andrew (2009): Talent management defined.PP.3. in Training and Development. May 2009

[11] Ashton, C. & Morton, L. (2005).: Differentiating talent management: Integrating talent management to drive business performance. London. CRF Publishing.

[12] Ashton, C. & Morton, L. (2005).: Differentiating talent management: Integrating talent management to drive business performance. London. CRF Publishing: PP: 30.

[13] Lewis, Robert E. & Heckman, Robert J: Talent management: A critical review. In Human Resource Management Review Volume 16, Issue 2, June 2006, pp: 139–140 (139–154)

[14] Lewis, Robert E. & Heckman, Robert J: Talent management: A critical review. In Human Resource Management Review Volume 16, Issue 2, June 2006, pp: 139–140 (139–154)

[15] Holden, Nigel & Tansley, Carole (2007): Talent in European languages: Philological analysis reveals sematic confusions in management discourse. A paper presented at the Critical Management Studies Conference, Manchester Business School 11-13 July 2007

[16] Tansley, Carole (2011): What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management?. In Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol 43.no 5 2011, pp 266-274.

What is the meaning of talent?

As laymen and in our everyday language the term "talent" is used to identify those individuals who we believe possess an "innate talent" and will achieve success later in life – either as entrepreneurs, leaders in the private and public sector, or as athletes. The term talent not only describes a "talent", by identifying him/her, but also explains why certain individuals become successful or will become the best within a certain domain later in life – simply because he/she is a talent. So in our everyday life, the meaning of talent seems to refer to something which is innate and as such, as emphasized by Howe et al.[17] *"(…) makes it possible for an individual to excel (…)."[18]*. Within sports this belief is almost reinforced daily because exceptional athletic performance in almost every broadcast, by most experts, coaches and parents is often described as caused by their talent: *"The belief that innate talent is, in fact, a primary construct for exceptional athletic performance is reinforced daily in almost every sport telecast, where the word "talent" is used as a synonym for "highly skilled" athlete."* And within business life, Groysberg[19] also found this common belief or understanding among research analysts at Wall Street, where 85% of those he interviewed *"(…) believe that individual talent is the prime determinant of performance.".*[20]

An equivalent understanding of the meaning of talent is prevalent within science and among researchers. In 1998, Howe, Davidson & Sloboda[21] published an interesting article entitled *Innate talent: reality or myth* in which they highlight that the way laymen use the term "talent" is the same way that researchers use the term, because *"like laymen, researchers typically believe that when they introduce the term talent they are predicting or explaining someone's performance, not just describing it."*[22]. Furthermore, researchers in general believe in talent being something innate and as such a necessary (but not necessarily a sufficient) prerequisite for high performance and success. If talent is considered to be a "strength", like Buckingham & Vosburgh[23] believe it is, talent is to some extent "innate" and *"(…) is inherent in each person."*[24]. If talent is considered to be a "competence", like Boyatzis[25] and Briscoe & Hall [26] is convinced it is, then some of the personal characteristics for achieving this competence are considered to be

[17] Howe, Michael J A, Davidson, Jane W & Sloboda, John A (1998): Innate Talent: Reality or Myth. in Journal of <u>Behavioral and Brain Sciences</u> . Volume 21, Issue 03 . June 1998. . pp 399-419. Cambridge University Press

[18] Howe, Michael J. A., Davidson, Jane W. & Sloboda, John A. (1998): Innate Talent: Reality or Myth. in Journal of <u>Behavioral and Brain Sciences</u>. Volume 21, Issue 03. June 1998. pp 399. Cambridge University Press

[19] Groysberg, Borris (2010): Chasing stars – the myth of talent and the portability of performance. Princeton University Press.

[20] Groysberg, Borris (2010): Chasing stars – the myth of talent and the portability of performance. pp: 6. Princeton University Press.

[21] Howe, Michael J A, Davidson, Jane W & Sloboda, John A (1998): Innate Talent: Reality or Myth. in Journal of <u>Behavioral and Brain Sciences</u> . Volume 21, Issue 03 . June 1998. . pp 399-419. Cambridge University Press

[22] Howe, Michael J A, Davidson, Jane W & Sloboda, John A (1998): Innate Talent: Reality or Myth. in Journal of <u>Behavioral and Brain Sciences</u> . Volume 21, Issue 03 . June 1998. . pp 401. Cambridge University Press

[23] Buckingham, M., & Vosburgh, R. M. (2001). The 21st century human resources function: It's the talent, stupid! Human Resource Planning, 24 (4).

[24] Buckingham, M., & Vosburgh, R. M. (2001). The 21st century human resources function: It's the talent, stupid! Human Resource Planning, 24 (4), pp: 17−18.

[25] Boyatzis, R.E. (2008): Competencies in the 21st century. In The journal of Management development, 27, 5-12.

[26] Briscoe, J.P & Hall, D.T (1999): Grooming and picking leaders using competency framework: Do they work? An alternative approach and new guidelines for practice. in Journal of Organizational Dynamics, 28, 37-52.

innate. And if talent is considered to be a "potential", as Silzer & Church[27] claim it is, then it also refers to some basic innate factors.[28] So it looks as if, as Meyers et al[29] point out in their recent research, that researchers in the field of talent management seem to just have adopted the term "talent" as it is, like laymen, referring to something innate and beyond real life and "*(…) handled the concept of talent as it was commonly understood; that is, they have not further specified its meaning* at all."[30].

The history of the term "talent"

Bringing this to light, the fact that researchers, like laymen, have just adopted the term talent as it is, with its inadequate references to something indefinably innate beyond real life and without being able to further specify its meaning, underlines the importance of the questions that Holden & Tansley posed earlier on: Do we really know what the meaning of talent is? Trying to be sure of its references and to see if it actually is possible to further specify its meaning, Holden & Tansley[31] and Tansley[32] decided to performed a philological analysis of the term "talent" in different European countries such as Denmark, France, Great Britain, Russia, Germany, and Poland.

Holden & Tansley found that the term "talent" has existed and been part of different languages for more than thousands of years and has also been defined differently over the centuries. Before the 14th century, "talent" as a (proper) noun had a denotative meaning referring to a rigorous denomination of weight equivalent to a monetary unit where value was attributed to one talent of silver[33]. The connotative meaning of "talent" was, on the other hand, restricted at that time, and those connotations which did exist only revolved around monetary capital and richness. For instance, the connotation of "talent" in relation to richness would be made by references to a referent in a specific situation where a certain amount of money would signify richness – but where the term "talent" would still refer to a monetary unit[34].

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[27] Silzer, R & Chruch, A. H (2009): The potential for potential. In Industrial and Organizational, 2, 446-452.

Silzer, R & Church, A.H (2010): Identifying and assesing high-potential talent: Current organizational practice. PP: 213-279. In R. Silzer & B.E Dowell(eds): Strategy-driven talent management: A Leadership Imperative. San Francisko. Jossey-Bass.

[28] I have not mentioned F. Gagné's well-known theory of giftedness and talent and the reason for this is that it has been quite difficult for researchers tofigure out whether giftedness is considered to be innate or acquired. But in different contexts in which Gagné uses the term giftedness it definitely leaves one with the impression that it could refer to something 'innate' (see Gagné, Francois (2001): Gifted and talented individuals: Developmental and educational overview. In International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Science, page 6218–6222. Elsevier.)

[29] Meyers, M.C., Woerkom, M. & Dries, N. (2013): Talent – Innate or acquired? Theoretical considerations and their implications for talent management. Article in press. Pp:305-321. in Human Resource Management Review 2013.

[30] Meyers, M.C., Woerkom, M. & Dries, N. (2013): Talent – Innate or acquired? Theoretical considerations and their implications for talent management. Article in press.pp:306. in Human Resource Management Review 2013.

[31] Holden, Nigel & Tansley, Carole (2007): Talent in European languages: Philological analysis reveals sematic confusions in management discourse. A paper presented at the Critical Management Studies Conference, Manchester Business School July 11–13, 2007

[32] Tansley, Carole (2011): What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management? In Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol 43 no. 5 2011, pp 266–274.

[33] Tansley, Carole (2011): What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management? In Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol 43 no. 5 2011, pp 267.

[34] In both the Gospel of Matthew (The parable of talents 25, 14:30)and the first and second book of the Old Testament (Genesis.20:16 and Exodus.38:25–26), we find examples of this restricted connotative meaning referring to wealth and richness.

Radical changes in the meaning of "talent" occurred after the 14th century, where the single denotative meaning of the term "talent" as a monetary unit disappeared and was slowly replaced by more abstract, indefinite and indefinable meanings such as "inclination", "disposition", "mental endowment", and "natural ability"[35]. Nor could the term "talent" any longer just be referred to as a noun, belonging to the grammatical term of nouns, since it was also an adjective, someone with talent, belonging to the grammatical term of adjectives. Even in the 17th and 18th centuries, the term "talent" continued to refer to both a noun and adjective and to this abstract, indefinite, and indefinable meaning of natural ability "*or aptitudes and the faculties of various kinds (mental orders of a superior order, mental power or abilities)*"[36]. And in the 19th century and up to this day, as shown above, the denotative meaning of the term talent, both as a noun and adjective, continues to be abstract and indefinable referring to something innate beyond real life, because "talent" is still being "(…) *viewed as embodied in the talented – hence a person of talent and ability*"[37]. In other words, the single denotative meaning of "talent" (both as a noun and adjective) has now very much disappeared and lost any direct relation to a referent, to a real life object.

Although this philological analysis may have enlightened us, unfortunately it brings us no closer to further specifying its meaning. So it still leaves us with a highly questionable meaning of the term "talent" and a similarly blurry understanding of it too and because of this, as Tansley logically notices, we are "(…) *forced to ask what the point is of using the term "talent" at all? Why not use any other human resourcing term such as "skills" or "knowledge" or "competencies?"*"[38]. Yes, why do we not just use another human resourcing term since we do not know the meaning of the term? But the answer Tansley comes up with is relatively unexpected: Despite the semantic problems, the absence of a restrictive, rigorous definition of the term "talent", Tansley insists that the term "talent" is still useful and informative because "*having a restrictive definition as this could make it impossible to find evidence to characterize talent*"[39]. In other words, Tansley sees the vague definition of the term "talent" as a kind of scientific strength because other researchers (or even consultants) can then keep elaborating on the definition by attaching new semantic elements (meaning) to the term and actually continue to provide further evidence for "talent" itself or be able to at least refer to someone who is a "talent" or has talents.

Talent as an accidental designator or a floating signifier

As opposed to Tansley, we see the absence of a restrictive, rigorous definition of the term talent (and talent

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[35] Tansley, Carole (2011): What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management? In Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol 43 no. 5 2011, pp 267.

  Holden, Nigel & Tansley, Carole (2007): Talent in European languages: Philological analysis reveals sematic confusions in management discourse.pp:3. A paper presented at the Critical Management Studies Conference, Manchester Business School July 11–13, 2007

[36] Tansley, Carole (2011): What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management? In Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol 43 no. 5 2011, pp 267.

[37] Tansley, Carole (2011): What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management? In Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol 43 no. 5 2011, pp 267.

[38] Tansley, Carole (2011): What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management? In Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol 43 no. 5 2011, pp 267.

[39] Tansley, Carole (2011): What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management? In Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol 43 no. 5 2011, pp 267.

management) as something that causes serious scientific problems for the science of talent management, because the radical etymological (semantic) changes in the term "talent" throughout centuries has not just made the meaning of talent blurry, but also turned the term itself into what philosophers and semioticians would call an accidental designator or a floating signifier and as such never could be defined rigorously[40]. And this is where the scientific problems emerge.

Before I linguistically demonstrate how a term like talent can become an accidental designator or turn into a floating signifier and before I later elaborate on why this constitutes serious scientific problems for talent management researchers, allow me to briefly explain what an accidental designator or a floating signifier actually is.

In his influential book *Naming and Necessity*, S.A. Kripke presents a realistic (an anti-Kantian) view of how names/proper nouns (directly) could refer or not (indirectly) refer to a referent in an actual (real) world. Kripke distinguishes between two kinds of designators, a rigid designator and an accidental designator, and further between two kinds of worlds, an actual world and a possible world. To be able to understand Kripke's definition of the two different designators, we need to be fully aware of what an actual and possible world means in Kripke's philosophy. In the following example, Kripke tries to explain the difference between the two worlds:

"*What do we mean when I say "In some other possible worlds I would not have given this lecture today". We just imagine the situation where I didn't decide to give this lecture or decided to give it on some other day. Of course, we don't imagine everything that is true or false, but only those things relevant to my giving the lecture; but, in theory, everything needs to decide to make a total description of the world.*"[41]

An actual world is to be understood as the real (actual) world where Kripke actually gave a lecture, and the possible world is the imagined other world where he imagined he did not give a lecture – or put differently, the possible world "*(…) is given by descriptive conditions we associate with it.*"[42] But no matter which world we are talking about or imagining, the proper noun Kripke is always referring to the same object (referent1), Kripke. Therefore, when Kripke explains the difference between a rigid designator and an accidental designator, he explains it with references to these worlds: "*Let's call something a rigid designator if in every possible world it designates the same object, a nonrigid or accidental designator if that is not the case.*"[43]. A proper noun like the name Saul A. Kripke refers to Saul A. Kripke in both the actual world and every other possible world. A common noun, on the other hand, like the "President" or a phrase like "*the President of the U.S. in 1970*" could refer to Richard Nixon (as the referent) and therefore could be used rigidly, but "*someone else (e.g. Humphrey) might have been the President in 1970, and Nixon might*

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[40] That is the true nature of a floating signifier or accidental designator because if they could be defined rigorously then they would not be what they are.

[41] Kripke, Saul, A. (1980): Naming and Necessity.pp. 44. Basil Blackwell – Oxford. 1980

[42] Kripke, Saul, A. (1980): Naming and Necessity. pp. 44. Basil Blackwell – Oxford. 1980

[43] Kripke, Saul, A. (1980): Naming and Necessity. pp. 48. Basil Blackwell – Oxford. 1980

not have; so the designator is not rigid."[44] . If that's the case, then the common name in the phrase (and the phrase itself) cannot be characterized as a rigid designator, but should instead be characterized as an accidental designator.

In his article *Rigid designator and semantic structure*, Arthur Sullivan[45] points out that Kripke's definition of the two kinds of designators is not quite rigid enough to be recognized as an adequate definition and therefore is in need of further clarification. Sullivan did, however, find a way of making Kripke's definition of the two designators more rigid and usable. He simply draw our attention to another (Russelian) distinction between "*referring*" and "*denoting*", which actually (also) characterizes the difference between a rigid and accidental designator. In fact, any rigid designator such as "Kripke", or any other proper nouns such as "Cicero" or "Gold", are rigid because they are *object-dependent* and there exists a *direct* relation "*(…) between a designator and what it is used to designate*"[46]. In other words, a rigid designator always *refers* directly to an object in the actual world (and all other possible worlds). In contrast, an accidental designator like the "President" described in the phrase above does not refer to but *denotes* (indirectly) what it designates, and "*which is a sort of connection that holds between certain semantically structured designators (such as "the person who denounced Catiline" or "the author of "De Fato") and that, if anything, which satisfies the compositionally determined condition expressed*."[47]. An accidental designator has, in other words, no direct relation to its object in the actual world, it is actually *object-independent*, but simply denotes – indirectly – something/someone differently in different worlds.

If we – for a moment – return to the term "talent" in talent management, we can see, from its etymological development, how the term talent before the 14th century originally was a rigid designator, was object-dependent and referred to the same object, a denomination of weight equivalent to a coin, in all possible worlds, while after the 14th century the term "talent" seem to have lost its object, became object-independent, and no longer able to refer to the same object in all possible worlds. When that occurred, the term "talent" became instead an accidental designator which denotes something differently in both the actual and any other possible world.

Within the science of semiotics, an accidental designator has linguistic similarities to a floating signifier and what it stands for. For semioticians like Claude Lévi-Strauss[48] and Marcel Mauss[49], a term, whether it is as a noun, adjective, or verb, that is deemed to be linked to an indefinable meaning, and therefore to a different meaning in different worlds, to a multiplicity of meaning, could be identified or characterized as a floating signifier. The term

[44] Kripke, Saul, A. (1980): Naming and Necessity. pp. 49. Basil Blackwell – Oxford. 1980

[45] Sullivan, Arthur (2007): Rigid designator and semantic structure. In Philosophers' Imprint. Volume 7, no. 6 August 2007. Dept. of Philosophy, Memorial University

[46] Sullivan, Arthur (2007): Rigid designator and semantic structure. pp: 4–5. In Philosophers' Imprint. Volume 7, no. 6 August 2007. Dept. of Philosophy, Memorial University

[47] Sullivan, Arthur (2007): Rigid designator and semantic structure. PP: 5. In Philosophers' Imprint. Volume 7, no. 6 August 2007. Dept. of Philosophy, Memorial University

[48] Levi-Strauss, Claude (1968): Introduction a l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss (pages 41–43) – in Sociologie et anthroplogie. Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1968, Quatrième édition

[49] Mauss, Marcel (1968): Sociologie et anthroplogie. Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1968, Quatrième édition

"talent" has evolved from being a signifier to a floating signifier, from being a proper noun that was object-dependent with a definable meaning, to a common noun that is object-independent with an indefinable meaning. What is fairly interesting to know about floating signifiers, and this is one of the reasons why I included the theory about floating signifier in my analysis, is that they often seem to contain a second semantic dimension, a magical or religious one. For instance, Lévi-Strauss[50], Mauss[51], and Lechte[52] have all shown that many of the floating signifiers (easily) can be ascribed to a category of magical or religious words – where words always resist any rigorous definition and somehow often denote some kind of indefinable "force" or "quality" in a possible world. As such, a floating signifier like "talent" reminds us of another floating signifier like "mana" in the oceanic language, which also seems impossible to define and which also denotes something indefinable, an innate force in human beings:

"Mana is a vague term, obscure and impossible to define rigorously (…) Mana is not simply a force, a being, but also an action, a quality and a state. The word is one and the same time 'a noun, an adjective, a verb'. (…) The very fact that mana is difficult to define suggests that it is essentially indefinable; or rather, because mana can take on a multiplicity of meanings, it is a 'floating signifier' – an indefinable 'x' (…)"[53]-

By being not only a "force", a "quality", an "action" and even a "being" (which possesses this "force" or "quality"), the floating signifier "mana" acquires some kind of religiosity or spirituality which seem to be equivalent to what the people of Tonga believe in or is "*(…) equivalent to (our) collective thought, which is the equivalent of society as such*"[54] (my parantheses). In our culture, in other words, floating signifiers are also to be understood as something we believe in, like believing in a "force", rather than knowing of and therefore expressing or symbolizing our (collective) belief or faith rather than knowledge. After the 14th century, when the term "talent" became a floating signifier, it actually obtained this spirituality and began making reference to something "Given by God"[55] as highlighted in the French dictionary Grand Robert, as in many other dictionaries in Denmark, France, Great Britain, Russia, Germany, and Poland. And even in our everyday language and among laymen, this spirituality reveals itself when we talk about someone having "a God given talent".

A semiotic analysis of the floating signifier talent

Until now I have shown how over the centuries the term "talent" has (been) turned into an accidental designator

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[50] Levi-Strauss, Claude (1968): Introduction a l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss. in Sociologie et anthroplogie. Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1968, Quatrième édition

[51] Mauss, Marcel (1968): Sociologie et anthroplogie. Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1968, Quatrième édition

[52] Lechte, John (1994): Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 1994

[53] Lechte, John (1994): Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity.pp.26 Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 1994

[54] Lechte, John (1994): Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity. pp.26 and the parantheses in the quatation is mine. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 1994

[55] Tansley, Carole (2011): What do we mean by the term "talent" in talent management? In Industrial and Commercial Training. Vol 43. no. 5 2011, pp 269.

or a floating signifier, how it has lost any references to a real (actual) life object and instead obtained a multiplicity of meanings with references to multiple objects and spirituality in all different worlds. But before I return to my hypothesis on why the term "talent", as an accidental designator/floating signifier, constitutes a real scientific problem for the science of talent management I need to take my linguistic analysis of the term "talent" one step further. One way of doing that is by performing a semiotic analysis of the term talent and through this analysis of the elements of the sign specifically show where or rather why an accidental designator or floating signifier causes serious scientific problems in talent management.

In *Elements of semiology* and *Prolegomena to a theory of language*, both Roland Barthes and Louis Hjemslev emphasize that the meaning of the word can take on two different forms or belong to two different orders (different semiotics), a denotative form of meaning (a denotative semiotic) and a connotative form of meaning (a connotative semiotic)[56]. They define the denotative meaning of a word (the denotative semiotic) as the primary (lexical order) meaning identifying the relationship between a linguistic sign and the object that it can name – this is what should be described as a restrictive lexical definition of the word[57]. The connotative meaning of the word refers to the secondary meaning of the sign and its different associations and values (second subjective order) – and this is what should be described as an extended elaborated definition (description) of the word[58].

Wille[59] demonstrates with the word MOTHER how the two different forms of meaning are attached to a specific word: The denotative meaning of the word MOTHER is simply related/referring to "birth" (woman+birth=mother) and defined as "*a woman who gave birth to a child and a MOTHER is the woman who gave birth to you*"[60]. The connotative meaning of the word MOTHER is all the different associations such as "care", "warmth", "confidence", and "age" one associates with the word MOTHER – and of course associations that must be understood in a certain social context and situation[61]. This relationship between the elements of the sign was once illustrated by Ogden & Richards[62] (as shown in model A):

[56] Barthes, Roland (1967): Elements of semiology.pp:89-94 London. Jonathan Caper.
  Hjemslev, Louis (1969): Prolegomena to a theory of language. Madison.pp.118-120 The University of Wisconsin Press.
[57] Barthes, Roland (1967): Elements of semiology.pp:89-90 London. Jonathan Caper.
  Hjemslev, Louis (1969): Prolegomena to a theory of language. Madison.pp.118-120 The University of Wisconsin Press.
  Wille, Niels Erik (2011). Fra tegn til tekst (From sign to text).pp.255. Forlaget Samfundslitteratur, København.
[58]Barthes, Roland (1967): Elements of semiology.pp:89-90 London. Jonathan Caper.
  Hjemslev, Louis (1969): Prolegomena to a theory of language. Madison.pp.118-120 The University of Wisconsin Press.
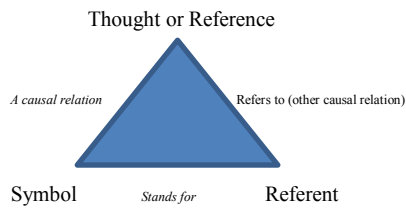 Wille, Niels Erik (2011). Fra tegn til tekst (From sign to text).pp.255. Forlaget Samfundslitteratur, København.
[59] Wille, Niels Erik (2011). Fra tegn til tekst (From sign to text). Forlaget Samfundslitteratur, København.
[60] Wille, Niels Erik (2011). Fra tegn til tekst (From sign to text).pp.255. Forlaget Samfundslitteratur, København.
[61] Wille, Niels Erik (2011). Fra tegn til tekst (From sign to text).pp.255. Forlaget Samfundslitteratur, København.
[62] Ogden, C.K. & Richards, I.A. (1985): The meaning of meaning. ARK, London.

Model A: *Ogden & Richards' Triangle of Meaning*

Thought or Reference

A causal relation   Refers to (other causal relation)

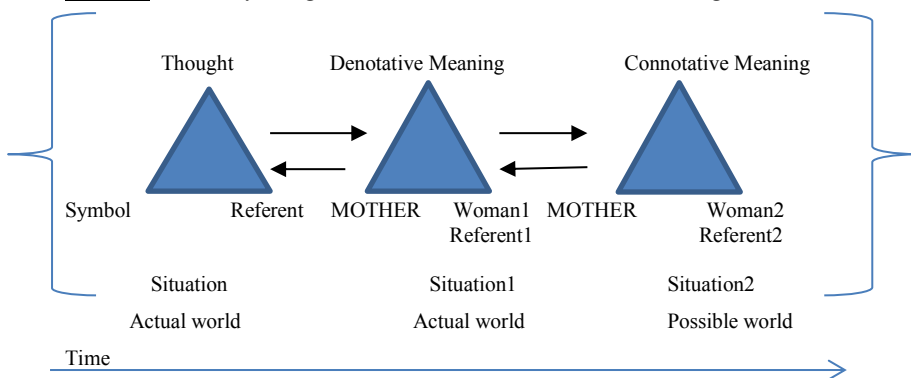Symbol   *Stands for*   Referent

What this triangle of meaning basically shows is how a linguistic symbol, like the word "mother" (or as shown later "talent"), is related to our "thought" or "reference", which is the idea or mental image that is evoked when the word is heard/read. If the "reference" is adequate, we should then more or less directly be able to connect or project the image (meaning) to a real-world object, by pointing out the "mother" – "the referent":

"*Between the Thought and the Referent there is also a relation; more or less direct (as when we think about or attend to a coloured surface we see) or indirect (as when we "think of" or "refer to" Napoleon)."[63]*.

Ogden & Richards' triangle of meaning has inspired me to design a slightly different model from which it is possible for me to show how elements of the sign are related to different forms of meaning and how dynamic this relationship between the elements of the sign is[64] (see below).

Model B: *Elements of the sign and the Denotative and Connotative Meaning*

Thought   Denotative Meaning   Connotative Meaning

Symbol   Referent   MOTHER   Woman1   MOTHER   Woman2
Referent1   Referent2

Situation   Situation1   Situation2
Actual world   Actual world   Possible world

Time

As shown in model B, each triangle is rooted in a situation or exists within a world that could be either described as the actual world or the possible world. The first triangle in the model is the one we know from Ogden & Richards, and the two other triangles are the one I have changed and should illustrate a more differentiated

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[63] Ogden, C.K. & Richards, I.A. (1985): The meaning of meaning.pp.11. ARK, London.

[64] I am fully aware of the fact that L. Hjemslev and R. Barthes were inspired by the French semiologist F. De Saussure and his theory of the dual sign, *signifiant* and *signifié*, and therefore have not written about the third reference, the REFERENT. However, by combining Barthes and Hjemslev with Ogden & Richards I am able in a simple way to show what occurs semantically when a sign turns into a floating signifier and how it loses its referent in real life.

triangle of meaning. With these two triangles, I'm able to show how a linguistic sign (symbol), like "mother" or "talent", is related to a single denotative (primary and restrictive) meaning that enables us more or less directly to relate to the "referent" and point out a (real) actual-world "mother" equals "woman1" in a "situation1". But, as Barthes[65] and Hjemslev[66] also showed, a sign does have a secondary meaning too, a connotative meaning, which complements the denotative meaning with more meaning and, put into Ogden & Richards' term, creates a new reference to a different "referent"; a different "mother" equals "woman2" in a different "situation2"[67]. The reason why the "mother"=woman2 in situation2 is different from the "mother"=woman1 in situation1 is due to the fact that in a different situation (situation2) than the birth situation (situation1) she is more than just a "mother"=woman1. In other words, all we know about the "mother"=woman1 in situation1 is that she is a "mother", but in a different situation, situation2 or situation3, she could very well turn out to be a "caring" or "warm" mother, more than just a mother, and therefore also a different "mother"=woman2. In the actual world and in all other possible worlds she would still be a mother=woman1 (rigid), but just not mother=woman2 (accidental).

When it comes to the relationship between the elements of the sign (and the relationship between meanings) it is – once again - important for me to emphasize that this relationship is dynamic (and arbitrary) rather than static (and non-arbitrary) and because of its dynamic nature the balance between the elements of the sign, and between the denotative and connotative meaning, can – over time – obviously change. For instance, a symbol can phonetically change or the meaning itself can change because a more connotative meaning has been attached to the sign. When that occurs, for instance, it is likely that the denotative meaning can or will – with time – change slightly , may be pushed aside or disappear and become floating[68] and an imbalance between the denotative and connotative meaning has then been established. The latter is what had happened linguistically with the term "talent".

As shown in model C, we can see how before the 14th century the term talent could be characterized as a rigid designator or a sign with a single (primary) denotative meaning and a restricted set of connotative meanings. The few connotations that actually existed revolved around "monetary capital", "richness", and "value"[69] and refer to a different referent equal to referent2 in a different situation equal to situation2 – but the "talent" still meant a monetary unit in all possible worlds[70]. At that time, the dynamic relation between the denotative and connotative meaning could be described as being in some kind of balance[71].

[65] Barthes, Roland (1967): Elements of semiology.pp:90-92. London. Jonathan Caper.

[66] Hjemslev, Louis (1969): Prolegomena to a theory of language. Madison.pp-118-120. The University of Wisconsin Press.

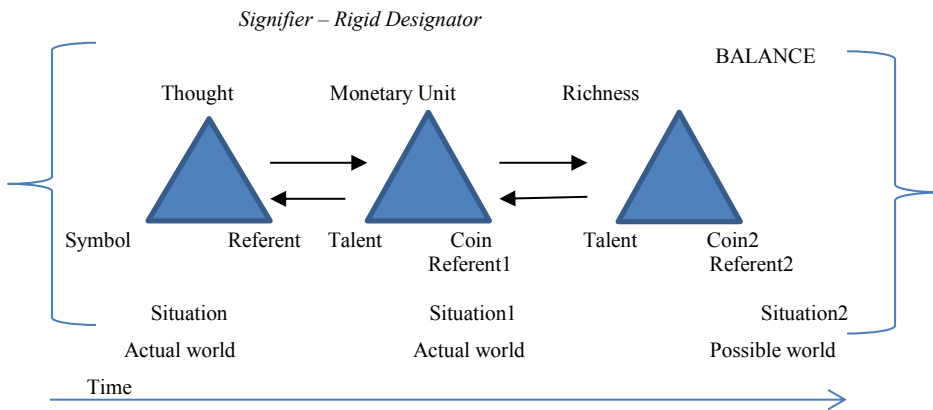[67] Illustrated by the arrow between the two forms of meaning on top of the triangle.

[68] Even the symbol or the word's grammatical form could change from being a noun to an adjective when an imbalance between the denotative and connotative meaning occurs.

[69] In both the first and second book (Genesis.20:16 and Exodus.38:25-26) of the Old Testament, we find examples of this restricted connotative meaning referring to wealth and richness. In the Gospel of Matthew, The parable of talents 25, 14:30 you also find examples of this restricted connotative meaning.

[70] Because more "talents" as a monetary units equals "richness" in different situations – because a certain amount of "talents" is not associated with being "rich" in all situations.
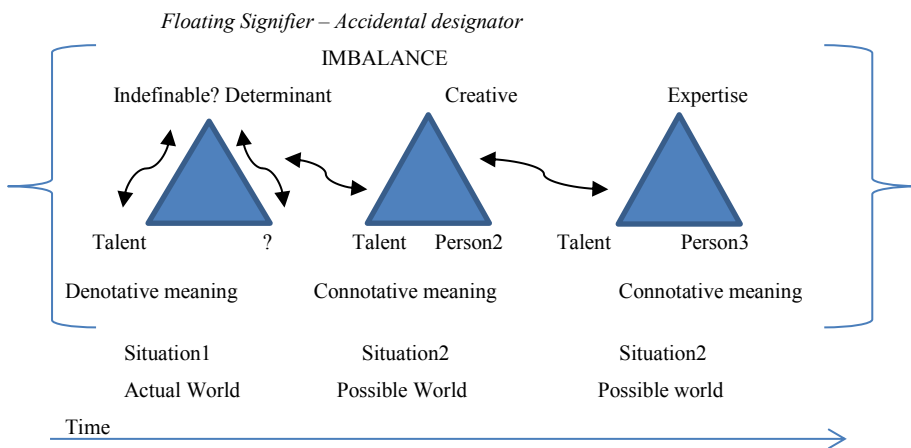
[71] To me balance and imbalance in a sign, between the elements of a sign, refer specifically to the balance between the primary and secondary meaning of

Model C: *Before the 14th century*

Signifier – Rigid Designator

BALANCE

Thought   Monetary Unit   Richness

Symbol   Referent   Talent   Coin   Talent   Coin2
                                          Referent1   Referent2

Situation   Situation1   Situation2

Actual world   Actual world   Possible world

Time

When the radical changes in the meaning of "talent" occurred after the 14th century, the original denotative meaning of the term "talent" as a monetary unit disappeared and was slowly replaced by the more abstract, indefinable meanings such as "inclination", "disposition", "mental endowment", and "natural ability". Nor could the term "talent" any longer just be referred to as a noun, belonging to the grammatical term of nouns, but was also referred to as an adjective, someone with talent or talents, belonging to the grammatical term of adjectives. The term went from being a signifier to a floating signifier and the dynamic relationship between the elements of the sign changed radically, causing an imbalance between the elements of the sign (see model D):

Model D: After the 14th century

Floating Signifier – Accidental designator

IMBALANCE

Indefinable? Determinant   Creative   Expertise

Talent   ?   Talent   Person2   Talent   Person3

Denotative meaning   Connotative meaning   Connotative meaning

Situation1   Situation2   Situation2

Actual World   Possible World   Possible world

Time

What model D[72] clearly illustrates is that when a sign becomes an accidental designator/floating signifier, a kind of imbalance between the elements of the sign occurs. The term talent will not only have lost its single

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the sign. If there is a balance, the sign consists of a single (primary) denotative meaning and restricted multiple (secondary) connotations. When there is an imbalance, the sign is without a single (primary) or has limited (blurry) denotative meaning and multiple (secondary) connotations.

[72] The nonlinear arrows illustrate the imbalance in the sign.

denotative meaning but also gained multiple connotative meanings and become unable to communicate the objective semantic content of the represented thing. In other words, the term talent loses its single object (referent=person1) in the actual world=situation1 and becomes object-independent and isolated. And it will keep on being isolated and keep on distancing itself from the actual world=situation1 because as long as more connotative meanings are added to the floating signifier the more it will denote different referents (person2, person3, person4, etc.) in different situations (situation2, situation3, situation4) and simply be pushed further and further away from the original, real referent(1) and situation(1). If we for a moment imagine, that the same etymological changes have happened to the term "mother", that it has turned into a floating signifier, it would then be impossible for us to know who our real "mother" is in the actual world.

Discussion

It is quite obvious that if we do not know what the denotative meaning of mother is and hence what a mother is in the actual world it would lead to an inadequate understanding of not only the term mother, what a mother is and what constitutes a mother in real life but also the situation in which a mother is conceived. The same goes for the term talent. We really do not know what the denotative meaning of the term "talent" is and will never know, because it is in the nature of an accidental designator or floating signifier that it will always try to resist a rigorous definition – because if it did not do so it would not be an accidental designator or a floating signifier. So if we then continue to use the term talent, which we now know is an accidental designator or floating signifier, within the discipline of talent management we will then continue to obscure rather than elucidate our knowledge of talent in talent management and at the same time continue to accumulate more questions than answers regarding the meaning of talent and talent management – and simply facing insurmounble scientific problems which in the end could undermine the very existence of talent management itself.

Firstly, if the term talent has limited or no denotative meaning and there are actually multiple connotative meanings attached to the term, the meaning of the term talent would then always be more subjective and dependent on the context (possible worlds) in which it is conceived and used. For instance, if we are in the world of medicine looking to recruit a medical talent, a talented surgeon, and the most talented in their field, the only definition of talent that can be used is the one valid in this medical context or at that specific hospital. If we are looking for a true talent-writer, a really talented commercial text writer, who is brilliant at writing slogans and other commercial messages, the medical definition of a talent cannot be used but instead some other definition relevant to this advertising context and the advertising company. And the broader the definitions of "talent", basically meaning limited or no denotative meaning with multiple connotations, that exist within talent management and within different branches, the further away we actually are from being able to objectively identify a real talent in both the actual and all possible worlds; i.e. to identify a real universal talent=referent1. And the further away we are from being able to do that, the more questionable it actually becomes as to who or what we actually are identifying or recruiting when we point out a talent – is it simply a talent or the talented?

Secondly, the more isolated (object-independent) the term talent becomes from the actual world, the (objective) situation= situation1, the further away we are from an objective understanding of the universal situation as well and in which a "talent" could be conceived or an individual transformed into a "talent" (just as in the case of the mother). And the further away from this actual world, the more likely it is that certain variables in situation1 which may have a decisive influence on the conception of a "talent" could have been overlooked[73].

Thirdly, an indisputable consequence of continuing to use an accidental designator or floating signifier like talent in talent management research is that researchers will continue to attach more connotative rather than denotative meaning to the term "talent" and therefore many more referents (referent2,referent3, referent4, etc.) could also be identified as being a talent or at least having some kind of talent. As long as this continues, i.e. adding more connotative meanings to the term talent, the more difficult or should I say impossible it actually becomes to distinguish the actual "talent" from the non-talent, or the actually talented individuals from the untalented individuals, because soon everyone will have some kind of talent and be some kind of talent[74]. In the end we will then all become talents or possess talents – which cannot be the case in reality.

If researchers within the discipline of talent management therefore continue to "accept" the term talent, which we have shown is an accidental designator or a floating signifier, as a valid scientific term and accept it as being a naturally rooted part of the human resourcing discourse, then no researcher will ever further specify the meaning of talent. As mentioned above, if that is the case we are then in great danger of not only undermine the scientific basis of talent management but also of turning talent management into a religious discipline, where "talent" becomes a question of belief in talent rather than knowledge of talent, and the recruitment of "talents" or talented employees into a religious prophecy, where no one knows who and what they have identified and recruited and what the result would be.

The term talent should therefore be replaced with another human resourcing term that could be characterized as a rigid designator – and the term talent should only be used when it refers to something we once believed has something to do with individual excellence. My suggestion for the future would be that talent should be replaced with the term "individual" (defined as a "natural person") and talent management should in the future be focusing on the qualification and competencies of the individual in the actual world and throughout life and therefore talent management as a term to should also be replaced with the term *I*(ndividual) *Q*(alification)

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[73] For instance, the literature of talent management has very little focus on variables such as coincidences and visions and I have always wondered why? Could this have something to do with the fact that the universal (objective) situation, situation1, disappeared (went unnoticed by researchers) when the term talent lost its denotative meaning and could no longer refer to an object? And the fact that in any other situation, situation2, situation3, etc., the situation is particular (subjective) and here most variables (e.g. education) are already known to and studied by researchers and their effect on "talent" and "talent development" to?

[74] Buhl (2010) recently claimed that it is no longer a question of whether an individual has a "talent" or is a talent, because we all have talents - and therefore are talents - but instead how many and what kind of talents each individual has and how big a talent each of us is.

C(ompetence) *Management.*

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