Strategy as Text and Discursive Practice: A Genre-Based Approach to Strategizing in City

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Abstract

Despite the acknowledged importance of strategic planning in business and other organizations, there are few studies focusing on strategy texts and the related processes of their production and consumption. In this paper, we attempt to partially fill this research gap by examining the institutionalized aspects of strategy discourse: what strategy is as genre. Combining textual analysis and analysis of conversation, the article focuses on the official strategy of the City of Lahti in Finland. Our analysis shows how specific communicative purposes and lexico-grammatical features characterize the genre of strategy and how the actual negotiations over strategy text involve particular kinds of intersubjectivity and intertextuality.

Keywords: strategy, genre, conversation, critical discourse analysis, organization, intersubjectivity, intertextuality

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Introduction

Strategies have come to play a significant role in business as well as in other organizations. It is hard to find a company that would not somehow structure its decision-making or reflect upon its identity with strategy concepts. Furthermore, strategic management has also colonized other organizations to the extent that universities, hospitals, schools, and even kindergartens now systematically produce and consume strategy texts.

The wide spread of strategy concepts has directed researchers to pay attention to the discursive aspects of strategy (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Hendry, 2000; Vaara et al., 2004). These studies have pointed out that strategy can be seen as a discourse which has its own specific conditions of possibility and that these conditions enable certain ways of acting while at the same time they restrict other actions. The fact remains, however, that there is a lack of systematic analysis on strategy texts, which is unfortunate given their central role in strategizing and organizing in contemporary society. In this paper, we attempt to partially fill this research gap by examining the special characteristics of the genre of strategy.

Our analysis of genre combines an analysis of the textual features of a strategy document with an analysis of the production and reproduction of the document in face-to-face interaction. The use of particular linguistic forms and structures in a strategy document and in the editing process is not arbitrary, but is in fact motivated by social conventions. In other words, the normative model of the strategy genre provides textual structures and vocabulary for any strategy. Furthermore, the genre may be seen as a socially recognizable practice of strategy work, which means that the production processes of strategies are institutionalized practices characterized by

intextual negotiations and reworkings of text. Therefore, while we speak of a genre of strategy, we refer not only to textual patterns but also to the face-to-face interaction of strategists that is intrinsic to strategizing.

By examining these two interconnected aspects of genre we show that the genre of strategy is by its very nature definitional. We show that while strategy text and talk aim at defining the form and content of strategy they simultaneously include statements that leave room for different understandings. This ambiguity of meanings is an essential part of strategy work and it is a key part of the intersubjective and intertextual processes of negotiating strategy.

Strategy as discourse

The roots of strategy discourse can be found in ancient military strategy (Sun Tzu, 1971), but the word 'strategy' comes from 'strategos' in Greek. In the military context, it has come to mean the "the art of the general." However, in the past century, 'strategy' and associated concepts have spread to other areas such as management.

The diffusion and legitimation of organizational strategy discourse is closely linked with the institutionalization of corporate management. In early 20th century, corporations grew into dominant organizational and juridical forms under which businesses could be developed in the US and elsewhere. Later, ownership and management became increasingly distinguished functions, which paved the way for the professionalization of corporate management. In the post-war era, especially US corporations grew and conquered new markets at an unprecedented pace. In this situation, corporate managers faced new problems and challenges that called for new conceptual and practical tools. 'Strategy' provided a readily available vocabulary. It also seemed to fit very well with neo-liberal ideology, which promotes corporate competition and expansion. Thus, 'strategy' emerged as a particularly suitable discourse for making sense of and giving sense to the new challenges of corporate management. This has been followed by an increasing expansion and

diffusion of strategy discourse in and around business and other organizations. In a word, 'strategy' has to a significant extent replaced what was previously called 'long-term planning' or simply 'decision-making'.

Parallel to this development, we have seen the emergence of 'strategic management' as a specific management subject. This literature has been strongly influenced by positivistic ideals of normal science and pressures to provide normative advice for managers (Shrivastava, 1986; Levy et al., 2003; Ezzamel and Willmott, 2004). As a result, strategic management has not been open to critical analysis. However, in recent years, we have seen the emergence of studies adopting various critical perspectives on specific practices and discourse that constitute strategy and strategizing in a range of organizational settings. In particular, we have witnessed the emergence of a literature on *strategy discourse*. Some studies have examined strategy as a body of knowledge and analyzed the various kinds of power implications that the language of strategy has for organizations (Knights and Morgan, 1991). Their analysis has inspired other theorists to examine strategy through a critical lens (Hendry, 2000, Lilley, 2001, Levy et al., 2003, Grandy and Mills, 2004; Samra-Fredericks, 2005). Other studies have focused on the role of narratives in strategy processes in organizational contexts (Barry and Elmes, 1997) and examined how discursive resources can be employed for strategic purposes (Hardy et al., 2000, Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003). Still others have examined how specific roles and identities are reproduced during organizational interaction and conversations around strategizing (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2004, 2005; Laine and Vaara, 2007).

Specific features of strategy texts have also been examined in linguistic analysis. However, this stream of research has remained disconnected from the organizational strategy discourse analyses referred to above. Nevertheless, key insights have been gained by studies focusing on mission, vision or value statements (Swales and Rogers, 1995; Connell and Galasiński, 1998; Williams, 2008). In their analysis, Swales and Rogers (1995) identified rhetorical strategies that were "designed in order to ensure maximum employee "buy-in."" In like vein, Williams (2008)

states that mission statements are "decidedly persuasive," as their goal seems to be to encourage identification of employees and other constituencies of organizations. Various studies in this field of inquiry have highlighted commonalities that speak for the existence of a strategy genre or at least a genre colony (on genre colonies, see Bhatia, 2004). However, these analyses have also pointed out that the communicative purposes of these genres may vary considerably. This is consistent with what Seidl (2007) has remarked on the conceptualization of strategies. He argues (ibid.: 206) that "different organizations may use the same labels for their strategy concepts, but the concrete practices behind the labels could be different."

Analyzing strategy as genre-based activity

We adopt a view that emphasizes that 'genre' is above all a way to get things done. In one form or another, this is the underlying conception of genre in most linguistic genre theories (Bazerman, 1988; Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Bhatia, 2004). In our view, 'the way of getting things done' is closely related to the notion of discursive practice. In this spirit, Fairclough (1992: 126) has noted that genre implies not only a particular text type, but also particular processes of producing, distributing and consuming texts. Thus, genres become visible and are exploited both in the textual structuring of specific texts and in the specific institutional or professional contexts that they are a part of. Hence, analysis of the genre of strategy implies discursive practices of writing, creating, receiving, using strategy, and sorting out the schematic structure of strategy.

Our analysis resonates with Bhatia's (2004: 18–22) multiperspective model of discourse, in which he distinguishes the analysis of discourse as text, the analysis of discourse as genre, and the analysis of discourse as social practice. Bhatia introduces a genre-based view, which is characterized by a quest to bring together these different levels, with a final aim of going beyond the textual space of description towards the social space of explanation. As Bhatia explains (2004: 21–22), the genre-based view pays attention to textual features of language use and to features of

social practices. The central focus of the genre-based view on discourse is, however, on professional practice. Then, the analysis of discourse as genre means the analysis of how a text is constructed and how it is interpreted, used, and exploited to achieve particular goals (Bhatia, 2004: 20). Similarly, Fairclough's (1989; 1992; 2003) methodological outline of discourse analysis distinguishes discourse, genre and style as essential parts of critical discursive analysis. In this framework, genre and genre chains play a specific role in the enactment and recontextualization of discourses.

In our analysis, the focus is also on professional practice, namely, the practice of strategizing. We see this practice as discursive in very concrete terms: the practice of strategizing is characterized by negotiations over meanings embedded in the actual and potential choices in strategy text. In a way, the analysis of discourse practice complements textual analysis, as it underscores the importance of textual features in both the production and consumption of the text. Moreover, this approach allows us to view strategizing as a social practice that is rooted in a specific social context. In our case, the specific context of city administration means that strategizing is linked with specific kinds of decision-making traditions and societal and social politics.

Case: Strategizing in the City of Lahti

This research was carried out in the City of Lahti, which is a large city in southern Finland. In Lahti, as in many other Finnish cities, the role of the city administration has grown over time due to the increasing scope of services offered to people. However, especially since the beginning of 1990s, Finnish cities have struggled financially. In response to economic conditions, city administrations have sought tools and practices that would help to better control, facilitate and manage decision-making in order to cut the costs of their service offering. Strategic planning, introduced in Lahti by the city administration at the end of 1990s, was seen as a useful method for decision-making in

dealing with the challenges posed by increasing budgetary constraints and the growing costs of the service offering.

In our analysis, we have focused on the city's official strategy document of 2005. The document is written in Finnish, and the length of the document is 2850 words, consisting of 225 sentences (not including fragments). The first part of the document includes a basis for the strategy compilation, the strategic foundation for the City of Lahti, mission and vision statements, and strategic objectives. The second part consists of critical success factors, evaluation criteria and target levels that have been combined into scorecards that examine the operation of the city organization and its development.

To better understand the discursive practice of producing and interpreting strategy, we analyze the meetings of the City's executive group during the strategy updating process. In these meetings, which took place once a week during spring 2007, altogether eight key decision makers discussed and debated over what should be included in the updated strategy document. These discussions focused on deciding the key concepts that should be included in the strategy and also on defining the meaning of these concepts. The discussion examples dealt with in this paper are taken from these meetings. 14 of altogether 16 meetings were recorded with a digital voice recorder.

Analysis

Our analysis has two parts. First, we focus on the generic features of the actual strategy text. In particular, we analyze the specific communicative purposes of the text: education, self-legitimation, guiding future action, building identity, and promotion. We also zoom in on specific lexico-grammatical features that are central to this text. Second, we examine the actual negotiations around the strategy text. This analysis shows that the written strategy text is produced and consumed in an intertextual process of negotiation. In particular, we illustrate how these negotiations often focus on the definitions and redefinitions of specific concepts.

Textual analysis: Communicative purposes and lexico-grammatical observations

Regarding the typical organizational structure of strategy texts, it is fairly easy to determine a genre of strategy. Numerous business guides (e.g. Hargrave, 1999; DeThomas and Grensing-Pophal, 2001) provide ready structures for a written strategic plan and thus support the existence of a strategy genre. These structures include the basic concepts to be used, the order of the text's elements, and also the typical schematic structure of a strategy. In all these respects, the strategy document of the City of Lahti may be viewed as a typical strategic plan. It uses concepts such as 'vision,' 'mission,' 'critical success factor,' 'threats and opportunities,' all of which recur in "how to write a strategy" guides. The document also complies with the proposed disposition of strategy text sections and the discourse structures that are assigned to these sections in strategy writing guides.

Interestingly, the text is characteristically educational. In particular, the text includes a great deal of metadiscourse, text that explains to the reader the logic in the propositional content of strategy. The following are typical examples[1]:

> Strategic objectives make things more clear and concrete, they open up the vision. They lay out what is meant by the vision, what is going to change and in what direction development should be channeled.

> Critical success factors are core issues or states of affairs whose success or failure affects the success of a public organization decisively over a long period of time.

In both extracts there is a clear explanatory mood, which is seen in the form of generic statements and claims concerning the meaning and use of strategy concepts. The text seems to be directed at a reader who does not necessarily understand strategy language or the reasoning related to this particular strategy.

There are also clear self-legitimating features in the text. In the following two examples the importance of strategy is highlighted.

> Strategy is a central tool for leading a city.

> The vision, together with the entire strategy, is a tool of the municipal council for indicating the direction in which the council wants the city to be developed.

Here the goal of the strategy, the reason for its existence, is stated. It is 'a tool for leading.' At the same time as these self-legitimations explain the importance of strategy in the City of Lahti, they also construct a context where strategies, in city administration or any other organizational setting, are important. There seems to be a need to tell explicitly what a strategy is and why it is like it is.

Another communicative purpose of the text is to guide future action. In the literature of strategic planning, a recurring theme is that strategy is a plan; it is the means of getting from here to there (see e.g. Mintzberg, 1994 for various understandings of strategy). This evokes future-oriented language[2]: in the strategy of the City of Lahti various states of affairs are construed as taking place in the future.

> In the future, a larger responsibility for well-being will shift to the people of Lahti themselves and their community.

> The inhabitants of Lahti, its political and civil servant leadership, and its employees will have a common, realistic understanding of the city's opportunities and the expectations related to them.

In addition to words (e.g. 'future', 'develop', 'new', 'renew') and constructions that express future time (Crystal, 2002: 112–115), the document is characterized by seemingly timeless expressions:

> The City of Lahti capitalizes on its good location and invests in projects – for example the development of the Kujala area – that strengthen its logistic position.

> Ownership management and buyer skills are improved.

In a context where strategy is seen as a plan, such expressions are clearly future-oriented. When a strategy is read as pointing out the means of getting from here to there, these expressions can be read as commissives and directives: to the citizens of Lahti they would be promises of some kind of future actions, and to the city administration and its various municipal spheres they would be directives to take some actions that lead to the propositions made in the statements.

Like corporate mission statements (Swales and Rogers, 1995), this strategy text fosters affiliation and identification. In social psychological terms, the language thus builds positive social identity. At the same time, it constructs the social category of Lahti as a unified whole: the virtues associated with Lahti ('… place for skilled, creative people', '… made up of active people that respect themselves and others') in the text invite the reader, in a manner of speaking, to identify with Lahti society.

Also, the text is promotional in nature. This means that the communicative goal of the strategy text extends to promotion. In other words, its goal is to contribute to a favorable reputation, which means being attractive to stakeholders such as residents, tourists, residents of other cities and the media, as well as to companies and other organizations in the Lahti region. It should be added that the promotional elements are not necessarily mere extra or additional functions of the strategy

document. On the contrary, the promotional function is an essential part of strategizing – as an instrument of image building.

With regard to the important lexico-grammatical features, the authority and voice in the strategy text are interesting. Studies of written bureaucratic discourse (Sarangi and Slembrouck, 1996; Shuy, 1998) have shown that the prevalence of passive verbs is a common feature in bureaucratic and administrative texts of both business and administration. This also holds true for the strategy of the City of Lahti: the passive voice is used in 78 sentences out of a total of 225 sentences in the text (not including fragments). Like in the excerpt '…buyer skills are improved', passives indirectly refer to actions of the city administration. Implicitly, then, the city administration is the agent in these sentences. Importantly, however, the Finnish passive is indefinite person (see e.g. Shore, 1988; Helasvuo, 2006), which means that it allows multiple persons to identify with its reference, and in particular, it often allows a 'we-interpretation.' In a sense, the passive construction implicitly calls for a 'we-interpretation' at all organizational levels of the city.

In the active voice sentences, 'city council' occurs as a syntactic subject only three times and 'city administration' not at all. It seems that neither the 'council' nor its hypernym 'administration' is topicalized, and, as a matter of fact, they are hardly mentioned at all: the document contains only three occurrences of 'council' (each of them as a subject). Added to this, the first-person-plural is used only once ('The vision expresses how we hope the city will develop').

Instead, there are 72 occurrences of the 'city' (9 times as a subject) and 53 occurrences of Lahti (11 times as a subject). In most of these cases, 'the city', 'City of Lahti', or just 'Lahti' are metonymic expressions; they stand for the legal entity of the city. This usage corresponds to the popular phenomenon of using company names as metonymies[3] for their boards or otherwise responsible agents. This is, of course, consistent with the fact that corporate boards as well as elected city councils have a legal right or even a duty to speak for the whole.

The city of Lahti will focus on its core tasks and prioritizing of its services. Lahti will continue to offer services that the inhabitants will supplement themselves by procuring services from other providers.

The city commits to continuous renewal and development that is planned and executed together with the employees.

In the first excerpt above both subjects seem clearly to denote city administration. Notice that in the second sentence Lahti is distinguished implicitly from its inhabitants. Similarly, the latter excerpt displays 'the city' as a separate entity out of which the category 'employees' is distinguished. This is related to power relations: the city council as the producer of strategy has the power to work with social categories discursively. In some cases, for example 'Lahti' could be displayed as a unified category consisting of all Lahti society (inhabitants as well), but in other cases the city council uses the power of dividing the category into smaller units. In general, however, the document does not construct the city administration and the political leadership as separate from the citizens. For instance, the document lacks any such expressions that would directly address the citizens as readers of the strategy (e.g. inhabitants as voters). These would include expressions such as 'your administration' or 'your city.'

In some uses the reference of Lahti is vague, and the locational meaning becomes highlighted ('a meeting place', 'place to meet', 'part of the metropolitan area'):

Lahti develops and renews itself with an open mind, acting as a meeting place for skilled, creative people in business.

Lahti is a growing city that is part of a metropolitan area made up of active people that respect themselves and others.

Besides the locational meaning, Lahti clearly has features of an animate, conscious subject, as it 'develops and renews itself with an open mind'. And at least by implication, the city administration plays a crucial role in all these desired or factual states of affairs.

In all, this strategy text is characteristically definitional. However, the document is rich with statements and claims that leave a lot of room for different understandings. For example, the text includes a number of nominal phrases, such as 'strengthening the income base,' 'successful communications,' 'the addition of the individual responsibility of regional inhabitants,' which all imply some sort of actions. Thus, there are several possible actions implied, and therefore the contextual meaning of such phrases is left vague, giving rise to possible multiple understandings.

There are two important implications here: First, the administrators and politicians who are in charge of the strategy and its implementation have specific power to interpret the vague or ambiguous meanings in the strategy text in their own way. This could be called strategic ambiguity (on the concept, see Eisenberg, 1984). Second, and relatedly, the strategists either cannot or do not want to offer complete closure in terms of the definitions. This underscores the intersubjective and intertextual processes in the actual production and consumption of strategy texts.

Analysis of conversation: Intersubjectivity and intertextuality

We turn now to the discursive practice of producing strategy and strategy text. Our view emphasizes the fact that the text is a product, produced in a specific manner and in circumstances under which the role of intersubjectivity and intertextuality becomes evident.

The production process involves meetings with debates on what to write down, writing practices, revising text, and making and discussing further choices. This is a process of continuous intertextuality, where what is said and what is argued in meetings and negotiations is given a textual form that is again taken under debate and conversation. Moreover, the text is intertextual in the sense that it builds upon strategy discourse, which is in turn built upon both societal discourses and various corporate discourses.

The following extract[4] illustrates how the text is produced through negotiation over meanings in text. The purpose of the entire meeting is to clarify the meaning of the concepts of 'basic social services' and 'basic social security'. Furthermore, the aim is to understand how these concepts are used in contemporary strategy text. In addition, the strategists connect the discussion to the discourse of 'individual responsibility', which is an important underlying context throughout the strategy.

Basic social services.

1	S1	But let's define basic social services then.
2	S3	Or is it basic social services or basic social security?
3	S1	Basic social security is narrower in my opinion (.) basic social services is broader.
4		That is, I don't know why they ((politicians)) wanted that basic social services
5		to be there.
5		(4 LINES OMITTED)
6	S2	But because they pretty much covered that, or understood that basic
7		social security in the (.) what you first said (.) in terms of legislation. It is
8		narrow (.) the concept of basic social security.
9		Therefore it [should be defined then.]
10	S5	[Lawyers keep telling me] that it's broader than
11		you can imagi[ne].
12	S3	[He]::h.
13	S2	[Yeah], sure, that's what we think [too].
14		(8 LINES OMITTED)
15	S6	°That°- now the increase of individual responsibility shifts- (.) it is, you know,
16		narrowed for the reason=
17	S2	=Well one might easily draw a conclusion from that (.) [is] that so?
18	S1	[No]
19		but if this basic social security is defined in a way

20		I just read from that, it is quite narrow.
21	S3	Umh. ((showing agreement))
22	S1	Until the moment, whe- when you start to get hungry or you don't have a roof
23		over your head or clothes, then comes society. It could be interpreted this way.
24	S4	Still, we might consider it a bit more, heh.

The extract shows the directly intertextual nature of strategy. The intertextual relation is first built between the official strategy document of 2005 and the forthcoming revision of the document. Intertextuality is also manifested. For example, in line 20 speaker S2 refers to the strategy document (…'I just read from that'…) and the document and its lexical choices are also made apparent in S1's turn in lines 4–5 (…'don't know why they wanted that basic social services to be there'.). The turn represents in fact two kinds of intertextuality: on the one hand it refers to the fact that in the strategy document there is a phrase 'basic social services' (in written form) and on the other hand, the same turn refers to the existence of prior discussions and decisions that have materialized in text.

The whole extract reveals, however, the important role of intertextuality in the strategy process. Discussing strategy and revising it, or the creation of new strategy, are all tied to existing strategy. In short, strategy is read and interpreted, and then the interpretations are discussed. This shows that the discourse practice of group conversation is a tool for interpreting text, and finally the attempt is to produce new text. But there is more to this: as Fairclough (1992: 102–103) suggests, texts can transform prior texts. In the extract we may see that negotiation over meanings and the pursuit of defining meanings as well as providing them with a relevant context do indeed transform prior text, or, as the text becomes interpreted and needs to be interpreted again, its choices are recontextualized.

When considering the task of the conversation, the request 'Let's define basic social services' (line 1) is revealing. As an opening turn it defines the purpose of the conversation. Hence

the requested purpose is to define basic social services collaboratively. As the request is evidently approved, it follows that the conversation is about negotiating meanings. But in addition, the business of negotiating over meanings also constructs a discourse practice of strategizing as social action where it is relevant to define concepts and consider meanings from different angles and to achieve a shared understanding. Significantly, the objective of the discourse practice is to create text, to find agreement on which concepts to use and how to use them.

Our last extract highlights the negotiation of strategy concepts. The conversation underpins the practice of strategizing as an intersubjective activity of giving a contextual sense to strategy concepts.

Strategic goal or critical success factor?

1 S1   Yes but it has to be measurable, hasn't it, that critical success factor. You [should be able]

2 S3   [Exactly]

3 S1   to measure it somehow. That is (1.0) in my opinion it's the customer- resident

4   satisfaction enquiries that are made. And they give some index number

5   about how considerable is the number of satisfied ((residents)). That would

6   be at least our objective with what we °operate°. Then the (.) satisfact- residents'

7   satisfaction towards those operations is what we aim for. That is where

8   we, at least, must succeed if we are going to reach the strategic goal.

9 S3   Whhell (0.2) yes. So you aren't suggesting that as a strategic go[al   ] but?

10 S1   [NO]   no

11 S3   Yes, well

12 S1   But as a critical success factor.

13 S2   Well er that has been our criteria here at section four ((reads loud from

14   the strategy document)) well-being, environment and comfortable living.

15   The residents'satisfac[tion].

16 S1   [yes]

17		(3 LINES OMITTED)
18	S3	But did you think (name of S1) that this would be placed here in in ((strategic goal))
19		number one? If [we]
20	S1	[Yes] I would specifically put that there in the number one.
21		(4 LINES OMITTED)
22	S1	But then if we still talk about these critical success factors here in number one.
23		Well (0.2) this profitability of municipal co-operation. That is, it is the increase of
24		effectiveness that we pursue with this project to restructure services and municipalities.
25		(3 LINES OMITTED)
26		But it just backs up the fact that we are able to take care of certain services with
27		certain standards.
28		(5.0)
29	S1	These things depend on the way you think of them. During a single
30		day at least in a couple of ways.

Evidently, the strategists are in this extract trying to determine the strategic goal and establish the difference between strategic goals and critical success factors. The extract begins with S1's turn, where s/he proposes a defining semantic feature for 'critical success factor'. The proposal is expressed with deontic modality, which implies external knowledge[5] of the obligatory property of 'critical success factor'.

After S1's turn, S3 suggests that S1's turn could be interpreted as a proposal for the content of a strategic goal. S1, however, refuses this suggestion and corrects that what s/he is suggesting is a 'critical success factor'. After that, S2 takes a turn and connects the sayings and their potential meanings to a source text (the contemporary strategy). This turn leads to an interactive and intertextual process of structuring strategy text: the strategists begin to consider the proper place for the 'critical success factor' that has been suggested. As an outcome, the 'satisfaction of inhabitants'

is chosen as a critical success factor. In addition, the structure of the strategy text is transformed: what has formerly been in section four is placed in section one.

After all the proposals for revising strategy and restructuring the text, S1 ends up underlining the discursive and contextual meaning of strategy concepts as s/he states that 'these things depend on the way you think of them'. Finally, S1 relates the contextually dependable ways of thinking to a discursive mind of a person ('During a single day at least in a couple of ways'.)

The ending of S1's turn could be seen as framing. In a word, s/he tells that what s/he has said is just one possible way of thinking, but there are others as well. Very concretely, the framing activity again highlights the practice of strategizing in city administration as discursive action, where the strategy concepts, their meanings and the practical implications of the text's choices are also negotiable to an individual strategist. Therefore, the language-game of strategizing is truly discursive: the choices made in the strategy text do have several possible meanings even to the strategists themselves.

Conclusions

In spite of the proliferation of strategy discourse, we know little of this genre. Hence, in this paper we have adopted a genre-based perspective to highlight specific characteristics of such texts as well as of the negotiations involved in the production and consumption of these texts. We believe that this analysis opens up a new line of inquiry in applied linguistics and brings new theoretically and methodologically grounded insights into contemporary organization research on strategy.

In particular, our analysis suggests that strategy texts have specific communicative purposes that structure these documents. Interestingly, the strategy document is educative in nature. This is seen especially in the use of educational metatext about the core concepts of strategy work. In addition, the text is self-legitimative; it justifies its own existence as it explains to the readers

what a strategy is and why it is important. Granted that strategy work devours a lot of resources, a considerable amount of the working time of highly paid officials, for example, this kind of legitimation is of course motivated.

The basic or general communicative purpose of strategies could be summarized as 'to guide future action.' This goal shows up in the strategy of the City of Lahti especially in the form of future-oriented talk. A noteworthy feature in future-talk seems to be, however, its bland timelessness: expressions that are in the present tense in the surface structure often indicate actions taking place in the future.

Strategy texts are also a means to create positive identity. In this sense, the promotional features in the text may be interpreted as fostering affiliation and building a common positive social identity in Lahti society as a whole. For example, subjects and the qualities attached to them invite inhabitants to identify with the reference of the subject. Also, the promotional elements found in the text suggest that another important purpose is to promote the city. Promotionality is also tied to a hypothetical reader of the text: the readers are obviously not only city administrators who need strategy in their work but various other stakeholders as well.

Looked at from a lexico-grammatical perspective, the voice and authority in the strategy text suggest that the city council as the producer of strategy works with social categories discursively. In passive voice sentences, the action is constructed as a joint effort or a corporate act of the city administration and its various municipal spheres. Moreover, as the passives foreground the themes and background the agents, the activities mentioned are constructed as happening inevitably and in spite of the actors. In active voice sentences, on the other hand, the subjects 'city' and 'Lahti' are often metonymic expressions, standing for the legal entity of the city. Hence, the city council acquires authority through metonymic interpretation.

In the second part of our analysis, we illustrated the negotiation of meanings in the meeting talk of the city strategists. The conversation shows interestingly that strategic planning is a discursive process: it consists of negotiations over text, and its communicative goal is to transform text and even to decide what to write down in strategy. This interpretation of text-based strategy work supports our basic claim that strategy genre is by its very nature definitional. In addition to strategy concepts, the definitional nature of the strategy becomes visible in the text's abundant use of statements and phrases that leave room for different understandings.

Our analysis showed that strategy meetings are venues for both interpreting strategy text and producing new text that is based on previous texts. Thus, the textual choices provide a framework for what is going on in face-to-face interaction. The intertextual and intersubjective meaning negotiations also highlight the contextuality of strategy and especially the contextuality of the key strategy concepts. In the practice of strategizing, the important task of the strategists seems to be to give contextual sense to concepts.

We believe that this analysis makes contributions to two literatures. First and foremost, to our knowledge, this is a first systematic discursive analysis of a strategy text and its role in strategizing. Thus our analysis opens up a new field of inquiry for discourse analysts, which is long over due. Importantly, this article also provides a framework for conducting such analysis. In particular, we point out that such analysis can and should cover aspects related to genre and intertextuality in the negotiation of meaning.

Second, this discursive analysis of a strategy text also contributes to the discussions of organizational scholars about the role of discourse in strategizing. In particular, we have shown in explicit terms the central role of texts such as official strategy documents in the praxis of strategizing (Hendry, 2000; Whittington, 2006). We believe that this analysis thus complements the previous analyses that have examined the role of language in more sociological – and usually

abstract – terms, often without specifying its specific characteristics and effects. In this sense, this analysis has both theoretical and methodological implications for this emerging field, which studies strategy from a discursive perspective.

We feel that our analysis has also raised new questions that should be examined in future research. For example, the research on professional and institutional genres might elaborate further on the linkage between face-to-face-interaction and text. More specifically, our approach suggests questions about the construction and use of knowledge in the chain of spoken and written genres in organizations. On the basis of our analysis, we believe that making sense of organizational activities in general calls for research settings where the linguistic nature of institutional processes is understood and operationalized.

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Transcription conventions

[point of overlap onset

] an utterance or utterance part terminates vis-à-vis another

(0.0)   elapsed time in silence by tenth of seconds

(.)   a tiny gap within or between utterances

::   prolongation

WORD   loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk

°   quiet sounds relative to the surrounding talk

hhh   outbreath

.hhh   inbreath

wohhrd   h's within a word indicate breathiness

-        cut-off

(( ))   transcribers' descriptions in addition to transcriptions

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[1] Examples are translated from Finnish.

[2] Note that the Finnish language does not have a grammatical category of future tense. Instead, futurity is expressed by a variety of lexico-grammatical choices depending on the context.

[3] The study by Cornelissen (2008) revealed that metonymies such as substitutions where an organization stands in for its members, products, facilities, stock or shares or a company-related event, are a central part of people's talk about organizations.

[4] This is a translation of the original discussion in Finnish. Participants in the conversation (marked as S1, S2 etc.) are directors from different municipal spheres in the City organization.

[5] The interpretation of dynamic modality could be plausible as well. This would mean that the obligatory feature of 'measurability' would be internal to this specific strategy. The discussions of the city strategists do not, however, show any signs of such interpretation.

BIONOTE

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