Taking the linguistic turn seriously: Strategy as a multifaceted interdiscursive phenomenon

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TAKING THE LINGUISTIC TURN SERIOUSLY:
STRATEGY AS A MULTIFACETED INTERDISCURSIVE PHENOMENON

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Abstract

Although we have seen a proliferation of studies examining the discursive aspects of strategy, the full potential of the linguistic turn has not yet been realized. This paper argues for a multifaceted interdiscursive approach that can help to go beyond simplistic views on strategy as unified discourse and pave the way for the new research efforts. At the meta-level, it is important to focus attention on struggles over competing conceptions of strategy in this body of knowledge. At the meso-level it is interesting to examine alternative strategy narratives to better understand the polyphony and dialogicality in organizational strategizing. At the micro-level, it is useful to reflect on the rhetorical tactics and skills that are used in strategy conversations to promote or resist specific views. This paper calls for new focused analyses at these different levels of analysis, but also for studies of the processes linking these levels.
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We have seen an increasing academic interest in the discursive aspects of strategy and strategizing (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Barry and Elmes, 1997; Oakes, Townley and Cooper, 1998; Heracleus and Barrett, 2001; Mantere and Vaara, 2008; Phillips, Sewell and Jaynes, 2008). This interest should be understood as a part of a more general linguistic turn in social sciences that has led to the emergence of various discursive theories and analyses of social and societal phenomena (van Dijk, 1997). Many if not most of the discursive oriented studies on strategy have been conducted to better understand the micro-level activities and practices linked with strategizing (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Hardy et al, 2000; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Accordingly, such discursive studies have concentrated on the central role of linguistic practices among other social practices in strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2005). However, discursive analyses have also been undertaken to examine strategy from a critical angle, especially to point out that strategy brings with it and creates new understandings, regimes of truth, and power positions (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Levy et al, 2003).

This leads to the question of whether or not this linguistic turn in strategy research represents an epistemological shift in the sense of creating new avenues for future research and novel research questions. My purpose in this paper is to argue that the full potential of the linguistic turn has not yet been realized. I will claim that if we take the potential of discursive analysis in its various forms seriously, we will be able to broaden and deepen our understanding of strategy as an important social and societal phenomena as well as the organizational activities and practices that are associated with it.

There seems to be a great deal of confusion around what a discursive perspective on strategy may mean. This confusion is partly explained by the fact that discursive studies are still rare in this field and in many ways seem to challenge our traditional ways of thinking about strategy and strategy research. However, this confusion is also related to the variety of approaches and methods that are available when conducting discourse analysis. In fact, discourse analysis can probably best be described as an inter-disciplinary research approach that nowadays encompasses several kinds of methodologies developed by philosophers, sociologists, communication students, linguists and others, ranging from macro-level
ideological analyses to the study of linguistic micro-processes and functions (van Dijk, 1997). Potter and Wetherell (1987) have famously stated that there can be two textbooks on discourse analysis with practically no overlap.

In the following, I will follow a critical organizational discourse perspective that draws from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a discourse analytic methodology that examines the linguistic aspects (language use in speech and writing) of the social construction of reality from a critical perspective (Fairclough, 1989; 2003; Wodak, 2004). This perspective sees discourses as part of social practice. Hence, this approach, unlike some relativistic perspectives, provides means to examine discursive practices without lapsing into an assumption that everything is discourse. Furthermore, this approach provides a framework within which various methods of discourse analysis can be integrated. Thus, it allows us to consider different facets and aspects of strategy discourse as well as accommodate different methods. While many discursive analyses tend to concentrate on static structures, especially some recent critical discourse analyses provide openings where the focus is on the processes at play (Fairclough, 2005). This is important to better understand how discourses may change and be used in by actors in different contexts.

Critical and other discursive scholars often concentrate on specific discourses, their characteristics and implications. This involves the risk that complexity, ambiguity, and polyphony in strategy discourses are overlooked. Hence, my intention is to adopt an interdiscursive perspective to underscore that strategy discourses in their various forms are often linked with other ones. I will also emphasize that there frequently are alternative and competing strategy discourses the interplay of which is one of the most important issues to advance analysis of strategy discourse. The result may be shown in dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1981) where different discourses, narratives and forms of argument may co-exist, but can also lead to more salient struggles between competing discourses (Fairclough, 1989) and ideologies (van Dijk, 1998).

In this chapter, I will outline a multifaceted view on strategy discourse that allows us to examine interdiscursivity at three levels of analysis. At the meta-level, one of the fundamental issues is the complexity of strategy as a body of knowledge. In particular, I argue that it is important focus attention on struggles over different conceptions of strategy. At the meso-level, it is useful to extend our understanding of the narratives of organizational strategy.
particular, by focusing on various and alternative narratives, one can better understand the polyphony and dialogicality in organizational strategizing. At the micro-level, I will reflect on the rhetorical skills and tactics that are used in strategy conversations to promote or resist specific views. I will also claim that not only do actors influence the conversations by their rhetorical moves, but also discursive practices have power over them. Finally, I will conclude by presenting directions for future research.

**Strategy as multifaceted discourse**

To view organizations and management as discursively constructed has become increasingly popular. While there is no clear consensus on what such discursive construction means and while incommensurabilities between different methodologies have been critically discussed (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000; Grant et al, 2004; Boje, 2008), a discursive approach usually implies a social constructionist ontology and epistemology that defies naïve realist views on organizations somehow existing ‘out there.’ This approach thus allows one to examine the processes in and through which organizational and managerial phenomena are reproduced and transformed, how specific organizations and management practices are discursively constructed, and how micro-level linguistic processes such as conversations or rhetoric are the core of organizational and managerial activity.

It is thus no wonder that strategy scholars have also applied discursive perspectives to better understand the strategy processes and strategic practices. Strategy has been examined from poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives to emphasize the ideological and hegemonic implications of this discourse and practice (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Levy et al, 2003; Grandy and Mills, 2004; Seidl, 2007). Strategy has also been seen as a narrative (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Dunford and Jones, 2000) or genre (Boje, 2008) the characteristics of which may vary depending on the narrator and context. Others have focused on the legitimation of strategic ideas to explain why some ideas ‘take on’ (Hardy et al, 2000) or the way in which specific strategic forms and moves are discursively justified (Vaara et al, 2004). Conversations about strategy have been analyzed (Westley, 1990; Samra-Fredericks, 2003) as well as the rhetorical processes of persuasion and convincing (Samra-Fredericks, 2004). Some analyses have focused on the metaphoric construction of strategy (Statler et al, 2008). Furthermore, strategy texts have themselves become objects of analysis (Hodge and Coronado, 2006; Phillips et al, 2008; Pälli et al., 2009).
In addition, sensemaking studies have made the point that language plays a major role in the cognitive and social construction of strategy (Rouleau, 2005; Balogun and Johnson, 2004). Studies of practices of strategizing such as strategic planning meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008) and the tools and methods of strategy (Whittington, 2004) have concluded that language plays a key role in contemporary strategy. Furthermore, scholars have also used a discursive lens to examine power effects (Samra-Fredericks, 2005), promotion of specific ideas and projects (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008), ideological change (Oakes et al., 1998), and inclusion and exclusion (Mantere and Vaara, 2008).

This proliferation of research has demonstrated the richness and potential of discursive approaches to strategy. At the same time, it shows a need to systematize and integrate various approaches to create an overview of what strategy discourse can entail. In the following, I will make the case for a multifaceted view on strategy discourse that enables us to deepen our understanding of strategy as well as to create new research questions at specific levels of analysis. This will be a crude model as I will only focus on three particularly important and salient levels of analysis that have relevance for research on strategy: strategy as body of knowledge, strategy as organizational narrative, and strategy as rhetoric in conversation. Figure 1 below provides a summary of this view.
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**Figure Strategy as multifaceted discourse**

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<th>Macro-level:</th>
<th>Meso-level:</th>
<th>Micro-level:</th>
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<td>Strategy as body of knowledge: Historically constituted discursive elements</td>
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First, it is useful and important to consider strategy as a body of knowledge (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Levy et al., 2003). This meta-level strategy discourse serves as the basis for any discussions around strategy – whether we are aware of this linkage or not. It is this broad body of knowledge that contains the key ideas, concepts, practices, methods, etc. around strategy in contemporary society. This discourse is spread in forms such as the academic, professional, and more popular literature, or in the media (Whittington, 2006) This often implies the reproduction of commonly held views, but may at times also involve discursive moves that give birth to alternative views (Moldoveanu, 2009).

Second, at the meso- or organizational level, there are particular discourse formations such as strategy narratives (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Boje, 2008). These discourse formations can be multiple, and their nature obviously depends greatly on the socio-cultural and organizational context. These organizational narratives reflect more general contemporary discourses around strategy, but have their specific characteristics. Some of these organization-specific narratives may also acquire a status as ‘official’ strategies, for example, in the organization’s strategy documents or project plans. It is important to note that there may also be other narratives, and
that the some of the alternative stories may be loosely coupled with or even question the ‘official’ strategies.

Third, at the micro-level, one is then dealing with everyday social interaction about strategy (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2005). It is through the actual conversations between people that for example the organizational strategy narratives are talked into being. These discussions include all kinds of interactions in both formal and informal arenas. Naturally, these discussions do not always have to correspond to the most classical face-to-face meetings, but can include, for example, chats, emails or other specific interaction modes. Importantly, in these discussions, broader ideas and organization-specific narratives can also be contested.

It is important to emphasize that these three facets are inter-linked in various ways. From a top-down perspective, we are dealing with a meta-discourse, the essential ideas and ideological assumptions of which tend to form the basis for organizational discourses about strategy. These organizational level discourses such as narratives, in turn, tend to greatly influence any discussion about strategy in a specific organizational context. For example, in the body of knowledge, conventional institutionalized views on strategy often involve militaristic conceptions where the role of top managers is to lead and others to follow the leaders without questioning their authority (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Mantere and Vaara, 2008; see also Suominen and Mantere, this volume). In organizational discourses, such conceptions may be used to construct heroic future-oriented narratives about conquests led by specific top managers. In micro-level conversations, these views may then be actualized in terms that portray strategy as ‘warfare’ or ‘battle’ where the top managers act as ‘commanders’ and the ‘troops’ or ‘men in the field’ implement the strategies (Mantere and Vaara, 2008; Suominen and Mantere, this volume).

From a bottom-up perspective, it is the micro-level conversations that give life to the organizational level discourses such as narratives of strategy. These organizational-level discourses, in turn, when taken across various organizations, feed back to and often reify the meta-level ideas and the ideological elements in this body of knowledge. To continue with the previous example, if the micro-level conversations use terms such as ‘commanders’ or ‘men in the field,’ this usage reproduces specific narratives in the organization in question and more generally managerial heroism and masculine values in strategy (Knights and Morgan, 1991). However, if the discussions turn to use other kinds of terms to conceptualize strategy, for
example emphasizing ‘collaboration,’ ‘networking,’ ‘co-creation,’ or ‘search for meaning,’ they provides alternatives to the militaristic narratives and broader conceptions of strategy.

Having established the multifaceted nature of strategy discourse, it is important focus attention on the complexity and dynamics of this discourse and how they are manifested at the three levels of analysis. Rather than providing an overarching framework or a review of the various approaches that can be useful, I will in the following focus on three central questions: struggles over different conceptions of strategy in the body of knowledge around strategy, alternative and competing narratives of organizational strategy, and rhetorical tactics and skills at the micro-level.

**Strategy as body of knowledge: Discursive struggles over conceptions of strategy**

The evolution of strategy discourse as a body of knowledge has become an important topic for strategy scholars. For example, Whittington (2006) has called for more attention on the institutionalization of strategy as discipline, including its academic, professional, and popular versions. More critical scholars have in turn focused on the ideological underpinnings and implications of strategy as a body of knowledge (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Lilley, 2001; Levy et al, 2003; Grandy and Mills, 2004; Starkey et al., this volume). In their landmark analysis, Knights and Morgan (1991) took a Foucauldian genealogical approach to strategy discourse. They traced the birth of this discourse to the development of multinational corporations after the Second World War. They argued that the evolution of this discourse has not been a ‘necessity’ but a result of a series of historical developments. They maintained that this discourse has effects on the organizational actors involved in strategy. In particular, they claimed that strategy discourse constitutes subjectivities for organizational members who secure their sense of reality by participation in this discourse. Levy, Alvesson and Willmott (2003) adopted a Gramscian perspective on strategy discourse. According to this view, strategy is an inherently ideological discourse that reproduces power structures. By participating in strategy discourse, organizational actors reconstruct hierarchies without necessarily being aware of such construction. Grandy and Mills (2004) in turn viewed strategy as a simulation and simulacra. They maintained that strategy discourse has attained a level of presentation that is hyperreal. According to this view, strategy discourse and its various models and practices have started to live a life of they own that is disconnected from other organizational reality. Interestingly for our purposes, by drawing on Wittgenstein,
Lyotard and Luhmann, Seidl (2007) suggested that strategy should not be conceptualized as a unified body but rather as fragmented into a multitude of (relatively) autonomous discourses.

These and other analyses have elucidated the importance of analyzing how and why strategy discourse evolves and spreads. However, there is more to be studied in this area. A key issue is to develop our understanding of inter-discursive nature of this body of knowledge. The roots of military strategy can be traced as far back as the Chinese Sun Tzu or the ancient Greek that introduced key terms such as ‘strategy’ and ‘tactic.’ Thereafter, we have seen these and other concepts being used increasingly in organizational strategy, but also how winning and losing, the heroism of leaders, and dramatic maneuvers have become institutionalized values for strategic planning and management in general. This militaristic root may also be one of the key reasons for the perceived masculinity of strategy discourse (Knights and Morgan, 1991). Related to the ideals scientific management, strategy discourse is also characterized by ‘scienticity’ and usually preoccupation with ‘measurement’ and ‘performance.’ Since the actual emergence of strategy as a distinctive discipline with the development of the modern corporation, strategy discourse has also been intimately linked with neo-liberal capitalist ideology. Free competition in different markets and the attempt to maximize return from investment have become institutionalized objectives not only for business, but also other organizations that have adopted strategy as discourse and praxis. Moreover, contemporary strategy is also characterized by spirituality, shown for example in the frequent use of concepts such as ‘vision’ or ‘mission.’ These and other discourses are intertwined into what we most often treat as a unified strategy discourse without focusing attention on the ways in which such elements reproduce and naturalize specific ideas and ideological assumptions (see also Starkey et al., this volume; Suominen and Mantere, this volume).

These different conceptions of strategy may co-exist in a dialogical relationship where they at best complement each other. However, it is also possible to distinguish struggles between competing views on strategy, which may have major implications on the way strategy is practiced. For example, with reference to the previous examples, it makes a huge difference whether the strategy process is conceptualized as a militaristic exercise or a collective search for new meaning. In a rare analysis of such competing conceptions, Mantere and Vaara (2008) distinguished three central discourses that seemed to systematically impede participation in strategy work: ‘mystification’ (the obfuscation of organizational decisions
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through various discursive means), ‘disciplining’ (use of disciplinary techniques to constrain action), and ‘technologization’ (imposing a technological system to govern the activities of individuals as ‘resources). At the same time, they also identified three discourses that explicitly promoted participation: ‘self-actualization’ (discourse that focuses attention on the ability of people as individuals to outline and define objectives for themselves in strategy processes), ‘dialogization’ (discourse integrating top down and bottom up approaches to strategizing), and ‘concretization’ (discourse that seeks to establish clear processes and practices in and through strategizing). Such analysis helps to understand how non-participatory approaches are legitimated and naturalized in organizational contexts, but also how alternative discourses may be mobilized to promote participation.

Attention should be focused on these discursive struggles and how they are played out in various arenas. In the academic arena, it is interesting to examine the ways in which specific ideas are legitimated and how certain theories win or lose ground. For example, Moldoveanu (2009) has elaborated on discursive moves through which such struggles are fought. He also emphasized that many academic discussions may be characterized by discursive ‘cohabitation’ where alternative views may co-exist without wide awareness of the contradictions that they involve. Along these lines, it is important to understand that contemporary theories of strategy involve complexities, ambiguities and conflicts. This may at best be a sign of fruitful dialogue and at worst an obstacle for future theory building. Crucially, different theories bring with them different assumptions about the nature of strategy and strategizing. It is no trivial matter whether the prevailing conceptions of strategy echo rationalistic models or include wider cultural and political understandings of actorhood, whether they conceptualize strategy as top management -led activity or organizational process, or whether theories and models of strategy focus on financial performance alone or involve stakeholder thinking or ethical considerations.

The popular discussions about management in general and strategy in particular may have an even more powerful impact on the practice and praxis of strategizing (Whittington, 2006). That is, the prevailing models of strategy that are diffused through various channels provide the basis for common wisdom about strategy. In today’s society, it is vital to emphasize the role of the media in such diffusion. In short, media both reflects and reproduces commonly held conceptions, and thus exercises significant power in contemporary society (Fairclough, 1995). This reproduction may often pass unnoticed, unless one focuses attention on the words
and terminology that is being used. Such is the case also with discussions about management and strategy that easily involve terms and concepts all connotations or ideological implications of which are rarely reflected upon. Thus, the struggles over alternative conceptions of strategy require careful discursive analysis. Such analysis is crucial to be able to better understand whether, how and why models of strategy process promote top down control or dialogue, inclusion or exclusion, masculine values or equality, cultural imperialism or diversity.

Strategy as narrative: Alternative and competing narratives in organizations

Narrative analysis provides another intriguing avenue for strategy research (Gabriel, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Boje, 2001). Although it is widely recognized that strategizing to a great extent storytelling, explicit analyses of strategy narratives or strategic storytelling are few. An early analysis is provided by Broms and Gahmberg (1983) who showed how organizational strategizing can be seen as auto-communication based on storytelling; that is strategy is to a large extent ritualized repetition of specific narratives of organizational identity. In their landmark analysis, Barry and Elmes (1997) emphasized the fictive nature of the narratives (ibid., 6): “As authors of fiction, strategists are subject to the same basic challenge facing other fictionalist writers: how to develop an emerging compelling account, one that readers can willingly buy into and implement. Any story that the strategist tells is but one of many competing alternatives woven from a vast array of possible characterizations, plot lines, and themes.” By drawing on Shlovsky, they pointed out that any compelling narrative has to achieve two fundamental objectives: credibility (or believability) and defamiliarization (or novelty). Materiality, voice, perspective, ordering, setting, and readership targeting are among the key devices used to enhance credibility. As to novelty, various strategic frameworks succeed one another because “readers have shifting preferences and attention spans” (ibid., 11). The narrative types that are used include epic (dramatic, heroic tales), technofuturist (complex and detailed ‘quasi-scientific’ texts), and purist (defamiliarizing, almost atemporal stories) narratives. Recently, Boje (2008) proposed that strategy literature provides specific bases for the construction of strategy narratives. He distinguished Greek romantic, everyday, analytic biographic, chivalric, reversal of historical realism, clown-rogue-fool, Rabelaisian purge, basis for Rabelaisian, idyllic, and castle room as alternative forms of strategy narratives. Drawing from Bakhtin (1981,
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1984), he speaks of ‘chronotopes’ as specific articulations of narrative in time and space. To date, we have, however, seen few empirical analyses that take a narrative perspective on strategy. In a rare example, Dunford and Jones (2000) analyzed the way organizational changes were given sense to in three organizations. The stories differed but they all included specific anchors through which meanings were given to the past, present and future.

Boje’s analysis highlights the polyphonic view on strategy stories, that is, strategy is and should be told in multiple voices and through multiple stories. Boje also provides another interesting concept ‘antenarrative’ (Boje 2001, 2008) that can be understood as a fragment of discourse that may or may not reproduce or create meanings in a given context. This view differs from classical literary narrative analysis in the sense that antenarratives are articulations that exist before established narratives that can be analyzed retrospectively (Boje, 2001). Antenarratives are also “bets” in the sense that when articulated it is not known whether they would have any impact on organizations (Boje, 2008).

It is interesting to consider organizational strategizing as involving multiple alternative antenarratives that provide alternative and competing bases for the organization’s strategy. Some of these antenarratives then ‘take on,’ that is make sense to others (Hardy et al, 2000). These antenarratives thus become ‘living stories’ (Boje, 2008) that are spread in organizational storytelling. They turn to institutionalized ways of making sense of and giving sense to strategy. Over time, they may also become important ‘sediments’ of organizational organizational identity (Czarniawska, 2004).

Although only some strategy narratives – particular constructions of objectives in time and space – gain such privileged status, there are usually alternatives to the ‘official strategy narratives.’ However, these competing versions are often expressed in the form of other, often unconventional genres. That is, the official epic or romantic strategies are being complemented and often challenged by tragic, comic, ironic, cynical, or even carnivallistic tales. In Bakhtin’s terms, this means ‘dialogicality’ – the fact that specific types of narratives tend to co-exist in particular ways (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Hazen 1993; Boje 2008). This is co-existence is, however, not arbitrary, but different strategy narratives give voices to different social actors and serve different social functions. Thus, various strategy narratives may
complement each other in organizational strategizing as well as compete in terms of providing alternatives for the ‘official’ strategy.

This interaction may have positive or negative implications for the organization in question. In the best cases, a multiplicity of narratives increases discussion about strategic choices and gives voice to people that may easily be marginalized in organizational decision-making. In the worst cases, such polyphony adds to chaos, increases internal politics, augments conflicts, and leads to an inability to reach consensus on future direction. Thus, the point is not that polyphony would always be desirable, but that researchers and practitioners should acknowledge the fact that there usually are various and distinctively different strategy narratives around organizations.

The challenge for future research then is to examine more closely such strategic storytelling and to map out various alternative stories, their construction, and how they may gain an institutionalized status over time. Furthermore, such analysis can and should focus on narrative tactics and skills of the managers and other organizational members – an issue which is intimately linked with the topic of the next section.

**Strategy as conversation: Rhetorical tactics and skills to promote or resist specific ideas**

Rhetorical analysis provides yet another fruitful perspective on strategy and strategizing. Prior studies on strategy discourse have highlighted the importance of rhetoric in strategy. In particular, Samra-Fredericks (2003, 2004) has taken a conversation analysis perspective on strategy talk. Her work has been distinctively ethnographic in orientation and used methods such as conversation analysis. Central in this approach that she calls ‘lived experience’ are the micro-level processes, practices, and functions that constitute conceptions of strategy and organizational relationships in social interaction. In her analysis, she has focused on specific rhetorical skills that strategists use to persuade and convince others – and to construct identity as strategists. These include the ability to speak forms of knowledge, mitigate and observe the protocols of human interaction, question and query, display appropriate emotion, deploy metaphors, and put history to ‘work.’ The essential point in such analysis is that it is through mundane speech acts and various micro-level practices that particular ideas are promoted and others downplayed, and specific voices heard or marginalized. She (Samra-Fredericks, 2005) has later shown that Habermas’ theory of communicative action and ethnomethodological
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Theories can pave the way for fine-grained analysis of the everyday interactional constitution of organizational power relations in strategizing.

New Rhetoric (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) focuses on various forms of persuasion and convincing. This theory can be linked with critical discourse analysis in the sense that it not only deals with classical rhetorical tactics but also focuses attention on discourse and its impact on rhetoric. Management scholars have applied New Rhetoric in various topic areas (Cheney et al., 2004, Sillince, 2005, Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). For example, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) developed a rhetorical perspective on legitimation. They identified the following kinds of tactics in their analysis of institutional change: ontological (rhetoric based on premises on what can or cannot exist or co-exist), historical (appeals to history and tradition), teleological (divine purpose or final cause), cosmological (emphasis on inevitability), and value-based theorizations (appeals to wider belief systems).

Rhetorical activity is at the center of organizational strategizing both in the case of more formal settings such as strategic planning meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008) and more informal encounters such as everyday discussions (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). However, in several ways our understanding of the micro-level rhetorical tactics still is limited. Future studies could focus on the construction of authority positions in specific settings, the rhetorical tactics used, as well as how particular available discourse enable and constrain strategizing. First, participants are empowered to speak and act when they have an authority position. In conversations, participants adopt and/or are assigned specific positions depending on the context and topic discussed. How this occurs depends for example on one’s own experiences, participants’ experiences, and shared cultural knowledge. In strategic planning meetings, it is particularly important to focus on the prerequisites of access that enable or restrict participation in conversation. Second, strategic planning meetings involve the use of argumentation to persuade and convince others. These rhetorical tactics deal with values, assumptions, motivations, interests, and aesthetics and aim at influencing and maintaining mutual understanding. Third, all this strategizing is also greatly influenced by the available discourses that on the one hand provide resources for the actors involved and on the other constrain their conversations by defining what is appropriate and what not.

The analysis of rhetoric should not merely focus on the legitimation of specific strategic ideas or initiatives, but also involve analysis of its resistance in strategy conversations. Although
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this topic has not been studied in great detail in strategy research, studies dealing with other issues help us to better understand the dynamics involved (Jermier, Knights and Nord, 1993; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Thomas and Davies, 2005). In a rare analysis of legitimation and resistance in strategic development, Laine and Vaara (2007) illustrated how corporate management’s strategy discourse may be resisted. In their study, middle managers in a business unit initiated an alternative strategy discourse to maintain their degrees of freedom, and project engineers distanced themselves from strategy to protect their identity. However, to my knowledge, we lack studies examining the tactics of resistance at the conversational micro-level, which can thus be seen as a major challenge for future research.

Such analysis can be complemented with reflection on the rhetorical and discursive skills that characterize successful strategists. Drawing from Bourdieu (1982), it is possible to think that knowledge of strategy vocabulary and skills to use this knowledge in conversations are important dispositions of Homo Strategicus, that is the successful strategist. Such knowledge and skills provide both cultural and symbolic capital that distinguishes experts from others that lack such capital. By mobilizing the most fashionable strategy rhetoric, decision-makers can win the support of different stakeholders and legitimate their own power position. In turn, an inability to master the contemporary strategy rhetoric may be seen as a sign of lack of knowledge or sheer incompetence.

This is closely related to the technologization (Fairclough, 1997) of strategy discourse, which leads to increasing complexity and even mystification. This implies that not all people are able to follow and understand strategy discourse, to say nothing of successfully participating in it. From a critical perspective, a key part of the value of management education is probably learning to master strategy discourse and its most fashionable versions. MBA programs are probably the best (or the worst) examples of how specific concepts, case examples and legitimate argumentation strategies are woven into management education. Those who cannot understand or participate in strategy discourse are in a completely different position. For them, strategy discourse may have no meaning whatsoever. These are cases of real alienation. However, even worse are probably situations where the powerful strategy discourse is seen as destructive or derisory. For example, the discourses used when justifying layoffs are often likely to produce such unfortunate effects.
To which extent specific organizational conversations around strategy include such features is a question requiring context-specific discourse analysis. Apart from uncovering hidden assumptions and reflecting upon problematic consequences, researchers can search for novel and more positive features. For example, discursive practices advocating organization-wide participation and open dialogue are very important vehicles for encouraging participation and in construction of more democratic organizations.

Conclusion

The starting point of this chapter has been to take the linguistic turn in strategy research seriously. This means that we must focus attention on the ways in which a discursive approach can expand our understanding of strategy and strategizing. In several ways, discursive analyses of strategy have already increased our comprehension of the role of language in strategy process and practice research, and they have also provided new insights and opened up new perspectives on strategy. I have in this chapter argued that one of the most central challenges is to develop a more nuanced understanding of strategy as a multifaceted interdiscursive phenomenon.

It is useful to distinguish three interlinked facets of strategy discourse: meta-level body of knowledge, meso-level organizational strategy narratives, and micro-level conversations with their rhetorical dynamics. To proceed further, it is important to identify and analyze various kinds of dialogical relationships as well as struggles at each level. In particular, through an analysis of the discursive struggles over different conceptions of strategy, we can better understand how organizational decision-making and action are both facilitated and constrained by such conceptions – often in ways that we are not aware of. By analyzing how alternative antenarratives become living stories and finally institutionalized strategies, we can see how strategizing is based on dialogicality and polyphony – that often passes unnoticed in more traditional analysis. And by examining the rhetorical work in strategy conversations, we can better comprehend the conditions and techniques that are used to legitimate or resist specific strategic ideas – or impede people from voicing their views.

The linkages between the different levels of analysis deserve special attention. This is because it is extremely important to understand the processes through which specific discourses are being formed in relation to higher or lower level discursive elements. Consequently, we need analyses that would transcend various levels of analysis when examining specific questions.
related to, for example, identity, legitimation, resistance, power, or agency (see also Sillince and Simpson, this volume). While some studies have already taken steps into this direction, more work is needed to map out a fuller picture of the various ways in which macro-level discourses are made used of in organizations and micro-level discourse about strategy. Similarly, there is a need to develop a more elaborate picture of how micro-level social interaction then contributes to the reproduction of specific organizational narratives and broader macro-level discourses and ideologies.

The following are in my view central topics for future research precisely because they help us to better understand the interconnectedness of different levels of analysis: production of strategy discourse, strategy texts as genre, recontextualization of strategy discourse, linguistic micro-elements, and the social functions of strategy discourse. Production of strategy discourse deserves explicit attention, especially because it is closely linked with the more general issues of power. On the one hand, as exemplified above, discourses tend to have a great deal of power over actors as enabling or constraining formations with specific conditions of possibility. On the other hand, as shown above, people are skilful in strategic storytelling and can use all kinds of rhetorical tactics and skills to pursue specific goals. However, there is a great deal that we do not yet know about the actual production of strategy discourse. It is thus paramount to examine in more detail how exactly strategy texts are created; for example, to which extent the prevailing ideas and concepts structure authoring, who gets to participate in the authoring of strategies, and how exactly different and possibly conflicting views are woven into strategy texts.

There is also a need to go further in the analysis of strategy texts. Little is known about the nature of strategy texts as a specific genre, which is unfortunate given the crucial role of strategic plans and other documents in organizational strategizing (see, however, Hodge and Coronado, 2006; Pälli et al., 2009). Furthermore, it would be important to examine the textual agency (Cooren, 2004) – i.e. the power of specific texts – in organizational strategizing. As is well-known, strategic plans can become extremely powerful documents in specific settings as they coin specific objectives and priorities – and are then used for various kinds of purposes. They may actually become ‘obligatory passage points’ (Callon, 1986) in organizations; for example to legitimate or resist specific ideas or actions. From a discursive perspective, it is also important to emphasize that it is the texts that reproduce widely held conceptions and ideological assumptions – or then create new ones.
It is also useful to examine the recontextualization of strategy discourse (Bernstein, 1990; Fairclough, 2003; Thomas, 2003). In recontextualization, specific discourses are translated by giving them concrete meanings and creating new ones. Thus, recontextualization is a crucial process to comprehend how exactly the institutionalized conceptions of strategy in the body of knowledge are made use of in organizations and conversations about strategy. Studies on recontextualization can especially help to understand the diffusion of strategy discourse to cultural contexts where it did not originate from. In particular, the spread of American-originated strategic vocabulary and methods to other places has certainly had a big impact on how corporations are managed in these contexts. Such studies can resemble analyses of the diffusion of management practices (Djelic, 1998; Kenney and Florida, 1993) or analyses of management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996), but should zoom in on the specific ways in which strategy acquires new meanings and the ways in which it is used in new contexts. Focus on recontextualization also helps to better understand what happens when strategy discourse travels from corporations to other organizational settings. In recent decades, strategy discourse has moved on to other kinds of organizations such as government organizations, universities, hospitals, schools, kindergartens, or NGOs. A central question is to which extent strategy discourse acquires new forms and meaning when it confronts other decision-making and management traditions in these contexts. Another important issue is whether this recontextualization results in dialogicality or more overt discursive and ideological struggles. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine the hybridization of strategy discourse, that is to which extent various discourses come together to form new hybrids and thereby new meaning.

Discursive analysis should take the linguistic micro-elements seriously. I have argued for the importance of examining rhetorical tactics in strategy conversations, but also other micro-elements deserve attention. For example, the use of pronouns (e.g., expressions of consensus and conflict with ‘we’ or ‘them’), verbs (e.g., active or passive forms to construct authority and/or assume responsibility), modalities (e.g., to which extent strategy is constructed as a ‘must’ or ‘obligation’), or the use of specific idioms (e.g., words that express images of militarism, masculinity, or managerial hegemony – or new alternative vocabulary) would deepen our understanding of the essence of strategy discourse. It must be emphasized that without a close analysis of such micro-elements we cannot fully understand how exactly strategy discourse is reproduced or used in novel ways in organizational settings.
It is also important to focus more attention on the social functions and usages of strategy discourse. I have already pointed out that strategizing involves legitimation and resistance, and that strategy texts may be used to promote or oppose specific organizational actions. However, it is important to broaden our understanding of the various ways in which strategy discourse may be used in organizations or society. Such analysis can draw from theories such as consumption (De Certeau, 1988; Suominen and Mantere, this volume) to better understand the various usages of strategy in organizations. In addition, future analysis can reflect upon issues such as how strategy may be used to legitimate the power positions of managers or consultants, used in management education to promote particular worldviews, or how the media may use strategy for not only informational, but also entertainment purposes.

To develop our understanding of strategy processes and practices, it is paramount that we acknowledge the discursive dimensions. This is not to say that everything around strategy is discursive or that discursive perspectives should privileged over other kinds of social analysis with partly overlapping objectives. However, it is important to emphasize that adopting a discursive perspective can highlight new features of strategy and strategizing. Yet, without specifying what kind of discursive approach we are employing or at what level of analysis we are working on, we easily only produce vague and ambiguous research results.

What I have outlined can be seen as research agenda that can hopefully inspire more fine-grained theoretical and empirical research. However, there are many other levels of analysis and questions that warrant attention in future research. Future research can take several directions ranging from sociological analysis of strategy discourse to detailed linguistic analysis of linguistic micro-processes and -functions. Future studies can analyze various types of textual and discursive material; for instance; strategic plans and other reports, media texts, books about strategy, email exchanges, web-based discussion, conversations in formal strategic planning meetings or in more informal settings, other written or spoken texts, as well as other modes of semiosis (e.g., pictures or film clips). While a discursive approach can accommodate various theoretical perspectives and empirical methods, I wish to conclude by emphasizing the need to appreciate the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions in strategy discourse – the specific features we have only just begun to map out.
REFERENCES


Taking the linguistic turn seriously: Strategy as a multifaceted interdiscursive phenomenon


“Taking the linguistic turn seriously: Strategy as a multifaceted interdiscursive phenomenon”


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