



How organizational strategy is realized in situated interaction. A conversation analytical study of a management meeting

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Abstract

This study investigates the essential role of ‘text’ – defined as the ‘substance’ upon and through which situated conversations are formed – in the communicative (re)construction of organizational strategy in managerial meeting interaction. In line with the ethnomethodological view of practice, the analysis of managers’ meeting interaction demonstrates how the participants orient to written and spoken texts as constitutive elements in the practice of strategy. What is more, the analysis shows how ‘texts’ are attributed agency and how they are used in a persuasive way for legitimation purposes. Theoretically, the study develops an argument that the communicative construction of strategy in situated interaction is premised on the dynamic interplay of texts as dislocal activity types and conversation as here-and-now activity. Overall, the study furthers our knowledge of the role of meetings as an important strategic practice.



1 Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing number of studies that conceptualize strategy as a situated and socially accomplished activity, as something that people do in organizational daily life and as part of organizational routine work (Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008; Johnson et al., 2007).

The turn to focus on strategy as practice has paved the way especially for investigating the linguistic and discursive practices of strategy, and previous research has highlighted that discourse is at the heart of professional work through which strategies are created or implemented (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008; Phillips, Sewell and Jaynes, 2008; Suominen and Mantere, 2010; Vaara, Sorsa and Pälli, 2010). Within the practice turn, some recent studies have also highlighted the essential role of meetings and meeting interaction in strategy work and suggested that strategic practices, such as for example strategic planning practices, are for a large part about recontextualizing and constructing texts (Pälli, Vaara and Sorsa, 2009; Samra-Fredericks, 2010; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). Thus, there is evidence to argue that organizational strategy work is deeply connected to the interplay between texts and talk.

This approach relates theoretically to the conception expressed in the Montrealian socio-semiotic school of organizational communication, which views communication as constitutive of organizations (Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren, 2009; Cooren, 2012; Cooren et al., 2007; Putnam and Nicotera, 2008; Robichaud, Giroux and Taylor, 2004; Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor and Van Every, 2000) The communication as constitutive of organizations approach (CCO) sees texts as semiotic artifacts (written or spoken) that are produced in the use of language, whereas conversation refers to the situated and contextual use of language. In Cooren et al.'s (2011) words, "*Text* is the 'substance' upon and through which conversations are formed; they 'speak' for the organization by shaping the conversations that appropriate them".

In particular, the role of text as an authoritative agent, capable of doing things in organizations (Cooren, 2008) and shaping the trajectory of the firm (Kuhn, 2008), has become an interesting tenet in analyses that focus on strategy as discourse and practice. In the wake of the CCO approach, Fenton and Langley (2011) add 'text' (defined as a material manifestation) as a nexus in their reformulation of the strategy as practice framework (Whittington, 2006), where they separate between practice narratives, practitioner narratives, and praxis narratives. Others have demonstrated empirically the centrality of strategy texts such as planning documents, and – importantly – connected texts to the situated conversations where they are appropriated. Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) draw from Ricoeur's concepts of de- and recontextualization in their analysis of how strategizing is constituted through the recursive relationship between talk and text. Pälli, Vaara and Sorsa (2009), in turn, use the analysis of intertextuality to examine how strategists in a city administration produce the content of strategy in meetings by negotiating over meanings in both prior texts and texts-to-come. Finally, Samra-Fredericks' (2010) fine-grained ethnomethodological analysis of conversation brings out how a strategic plan is an interactional accomplishment.

Regardless of the growing scholarly interest on the interplay of text and talk, the discursive practice that takes place within conversations has remained under-researched in the strategy as discourse and practice literature. Adding to the aforementioned studies of strategy talk and text and resonating with the theoretical stance formulated specifically in the Montréal



school's socio-semiotic approach to conversation-text relations (Kuhn, 2008; Robichaud, Giroux and Taylor, 2004; Taylor and Van Every, 2000), we will thus in this paper show that the dynamic interplay of text and conversation can be captured for analysis and further considerations by paying close attention to the sequential, turn-by-turn structure of conversation.

We will specifically show that the way strategy is made sense of is based on, on the one hand, the institutional and generic characteristics of social interaction in managerial meetings. On the other hand, our study will demonstrate how these sensemaking processes are constrained and affected by generic knowledge that is related to specific types of communicative activities, which we, following the definition proposed by Francois Cooren and his colleagues (e.g. Cooren, 2008; 2012; Cooren and Matté, 2010), see as 'figures' that are 'ventriloquated' in interaction.

We demonstrate and exemplify our theoretical approach with an empirical analysis of conversational interaction. Applying ethnomethodological conversation analytical methodology, the empirical analysis concentrates on a single sequence in one managerial meeting. Following the methodological thrust of ethnomethodological conversation analysis, we are particularly interested in the ways the participants of conversation produce and display common understanding, which we view as a process that is modified and constructed in interaction (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 1992).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We first present the case of our illustrative analysis and then explain the method and analytical procedure. The empirical analysis comprises four parts. In the final section of the paper we discuss our findings, especially in terms of their implications for studying strategy work in and through discourse.

2 The case

The empirical analysis concentrates on a single sequence in a managerial meeting. In that sequence the participants of the meeting discussed conducting a customer satisfaction survey, which is *per se* a strategic text, given that customer satisfaction mirrors organizational attitudes and is connected with job satisfaction and efficiency (Gillespie et al., 2008; Gilson, Shalley and Blum, 2001). In this respect, the participants in the meeting were making a textual product that was consequential for the directions and strategic outcomes of the firm.

The sequence we analyze lasts only a few minutes, and it is part of a longer sequence on the topic of the customer satisfaction survey, which was one of eight topics on the agenda for the meeting. In total, the meeting lasted four hours; the topic of customer satisfaction surveys was discussed for approximately one hour. Nine participants attended the meeting, all of them managers with different ranks in the organizational hierarchy. However, their responsibility as a team was to manage human resources in a multinational forest-industry corporation. Hence, we can conclude that they were in the position to make strategic decisions that were consequential for the entire corporation. It could be argued that strategizing in the sense of making strategic decisions that affect the entire corporation was their duty and that their regular meetings served as a tool in fulfilling this duty. Nevertheless, the participants and their work of strategizing was subordinate to the corporate level management group and its strategy work, which – especially in the form of official corporate strategy (called here “Corporation Quality 2010”) – quite obviously set tasks and guidelines for the work of this human resource management team.



The meeting was a routine periodic meeting and had a fairly fixed agenda. Still, considering Boden's (1994) rough distinction between formal and informal meetings, this meeting could best be described as semi-formal. Although it had an agenda, a chairperson, and a predefined time and space, the mode of participation (for example the turn-taking system) and the way of talking were informal. For example, the participants joked, laughed, and made small talk on personal matters. The language of the meeting was lingua franca English. Five of the managers were Finnish, three were Swedish, and one was German.

3 Data and methods

The piece of data for our case study is part of a larger database of video-recorded company-internal meetings (about 35 hours in total) held in two corporations in 2000–2003. The data were collected at the Helsinki School of Economics in conjunction with a research project on internal communication in recently merged Finnish-Swedish corporations. They were transcribed according to conversation analytic principles (see, e.g. Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998).

The methodology of the article is based on ethnomethodological conversation analysis (Heritage, 1984; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; ten Have, 1999). In conversation analytical research face-to-face interaction is seen as structurally organized. Contributions in interaction are analyzed in their sequential context. Every turn is shaped by the preceding context and renews that context for the next speaker. By analyzing sequential patterns it is possible to uncover the orientations and competences on which the participants in the interaction rely (Heritage, 1984: 241–244). In the conversation analytical study of institutional interaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992) the goal of the research is to show how the participants accomplish institutional tasks through the sequential patterns of an institutional encounter. Additionally, conversation analysts use the concept of 'turn design' (ten Have, 1999). This means that every turn of talk is designed for the particular recipient(s) in the particular interactional context. In a study on institutional talk the design of turns may also reflect institutional tasks.

In addition, our analysis extends to intertextuality. We focus on the ways in which the participants refer to texts or face-to-face encounters and make them interact with other texts or face-to-face encounters. Conversation analysts have studied the relationship between spoken interaction and written texts first by analyzing how participants in interaction use texts to achieve their practical goals and in so doing reconstruct the meanings of the texts (e.g. Lehtinen, 2009), and secondly by showing how texts (e.g. a record of an interrogation; Komter, 2006) are constructed during interaction. Although we draw on these studies, our approach goes further in its use of the notion of activity type. Hence, our analysis is in accordance with Fairclough's (1992) conception of intertextuality; it is manifested by referring to specific texts and constituted by referring to generic activity types.

The mode of analysis in this article can be called single case analysis (cf. Schegloff, 1987, 1988; Firth, 1995; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). For the most part, conversation analysts gather collections of instances of a phenomenon and try to find recurrent patterns across these instances. Even then, however, it is important to analyze all of the individual cases in detail. This is because, according to the conversation analytical view, talk-in-interaction is not orderly in terms of statistical regularity but case-by-case. The participants in the interaction themselves produce singular episodes of conversation in an orderly fashion, and that order



should also be recognizable to the analyst (Schegloff, 1987). In a single case analysis a stretch of data – usually fairly long – is analyzed in detail. There can be at least two kinds of different goals. First of all, the goal can be to show how the results of earlier analyses can be applied to a longer stretch of talk in order to display its orderliness (Schegloff, 1987). On the other hand, single case analysis can be used to make a proposal on the interactional function of a phenomenon that has not previously been subject to conversation analysis (Schegloff, 1988).

In this article we conduct the latter kind of single case analysis. We look at how strategizing is contextualized in a single extended sequence in a meeting interaction by referring to linguistic activities and – at the same time – by invoking organizational activity types. However, when we began to go through the data, we first formed a collection. In doing so, we took intertextuality as our point of departure. We collected instances in which participants in the meeting referred to a text or face-to-face encounter. In the case of the sequence analyzed here, we noticed in the preliminary analysis that the references to various linguistic activities seemed to make the interaction strategic. We therefore decided to conduct a detailed analysis of the case in order to shed light on strategizing in meetings. In our analysis, we paid special attention to the sequential aspects of the case, in the spirit of the conversation analytical mentality. We also extended our intertextual analysis by considering how the participants not only referred to singular activities but also to activity types.

4 Empirical analysis

In our empirical analysis we will mainly look at the design of one long turn in the meeting in its interactional context. The turn in question is Jouko's introduction to the customer satisfaction survey. We will connect it to its interactional context in two ways. We will pay attention to its sequential position; it follows the chair's opening of the agenda item and is followed by discussion of the issue by the participants. Also, we will look at the interactional dimensions during the turn, e.g. gazes and other reactions by the participants to the turn.

In our analysis we will make four interdependent points. Hence, this section is divided into four parts. In the first part we will show how Jouko constructs the meeting as a strategy meeting by invoking different activity types. In the second part we will show how power and agency are attributed to these activity types in the meeting. Thirdly, we will look at how participatory rights are distributed in the meeting vis-à-vis the activity types. And finally, we will investigate how the turn and the strategizing constructed in the turn fit into the sequence, and how they are consequentially embedded in the interaction in the meeting. In particular, we will show how the activity types are used in a persuasive way for legitimating the agenda item.

All of the points mentioned above can be seen in extract 1, which is reproduced below. We therefore refer repeatedly to it in our analysis. In addition, we will use two other extracts to support our arguments. Extract 1 is from the beginning of Jouko's turn. The chair's (Johan's) opening is also included in the extract. The references to activity types are in bold.

Extract 1

01 Johan:	Er customer satisfaction surveys
02 Jouko:	Ok (.) Yes I took some transparencies er
03	(.) that I might show (.) as you know (.)
04	there has been er (.) Johan knows better
05	the background of the discussions what was
06	the (), (.) I understand it was discussed



07 **in the management er group er (.) how to**
 08 **cope with (.) with one (0.5) er one er**
 09 **issue, (.) which has many aspects of course,**
 10 **the issue of customer satisfaction, (.) er**
 11 **of of er (0.5) what comes to to corporate**
 12 **staff and service units (.) of course they**
 13 **have many other reasons for that, (.) but**
 14 **one (0.6) one rather important reason of**
 15 **course is er is the self assessment, (.)**
 16 **according to Corporation Quality Two**
 17 **Thousand Ten (.) which (.) requires that you**
 18 **just don't think or suppose but you you pro-**
 19 **(.) most (.) should have er (0.8) concrete=**
 20 **Raija:** **=Data.**
 21 **Jouko:** **Con[↑crete data.**
 22 **Seppo:** **[Facts.**
 23 **Raija:** **Mn.**

Before the analysis, it is necessary to define our central analytical concept ‘activity type’. Following Levinson (1992), we define activity types as any culturally recognized activities that are socially constituted and bounded events with different kinds of constraints (e.g. on setting or participants). Some of the examples Levinson (ibid.) mentions are as diverse as ‘a task in a workshop’, ‘A Bingo session’, ‘a dinner party’, and ‘a football game’. Important is that all activity types entail specific norms and rules of interaction.

For our purposes it is however most important to see activity types as capable of doing things in interaction. In the terminology proposed by Cooren (e.g. 2008; 2010; 2012; Cooren and Matté, 2010), we can thus view the relationship between activity types and their usage in interaction as a form of *ventriloquism*: the key idea being that ‘objects’ or ‘figures’, whether semiotic or material in nature and taking the form of for example tools, texts, policies, statuses, or collectives, “say” or “do things” when people speak or write. In this view also activity types are ‘figures’ that speak in a given situation. However, as our analysis shows, it is important that the agency that activity types gain is acknowledged in interaction. In other terms, their relevance and agency comes about when an instance of them is recognized and the recognition is demonstrated in the interaction.

The activity types we are interested in this paper are to a great degree constituted by talk and by textual interaction. Thus, linguistic activities can be seen as integral to the activity types. In extract 1, three different linguistic activities that are dislocal to the meeting are referred to and consequently three different activity types are invoked. First, Johan introduces the topic and gives it the name of an activity type, the ‘customer satisfaction survey.’ In his introduction to the topic, Jouko mentions two other activities, the ‘management group’ and *Corporation Quality Two Thousand Ten*. The last two are not, strictly speaking, names of activity types. Rather, they are descriptions of singular linguistic objects or activities. Jouko talks about a specific meeting of the management group and a specific text that has a specific name. We will argue, however, that these activities are treated by the participants as instances of activity types. The meeting of the management group is an instance of ‘management group meetings’ in general, and *Corporation Quality Two Thousand Ten* is an instance of ‘strategy texts’. We will show that the activities ‘do’ what they do because they are treated as having general characteristics. For example, the specific strategy text can be treated as having power and agency because it is seen in the context of strategy in general.



4.1 Reconstructing the meeting as a site for strategizing

As we already noted, the meeting in question is not a strategy meeting by default. Our contention is, however, that it becomes a strategy meeting through the action of the meeting participants. Strategizing is therefore an accomplishment. At the same time, strategy is recontextualized; it is brought into the context of the meeting. Furthermore, we argue that strategy is recontextualized by invoking generic activity types.

In this section we will especially concentrate on the third of the three activities mentioned. As such, it is not the name of an activity type, but the name of a specific text, a strategy text of the corporation¹. However, it can be seen in the extract that the participants in the meeting (also) treat it as a representative of an activity type, a ‘strategy text.’ The requirements of the text are presented as a ‘reason’ (line 14) for working on the customer satisfaction survey. Hence, it is presented as a text that guides action in the company. It is used as a vehicle for turning the meeting into a strategizing event. Through a reference to one of the company's strategy texts, the task of the participants in the meeting is thus constructed as a strategic one.

The reference to the “management group” (line 7) is also important in the recontextualization of strategy. The strategic importance of the task is not presented merely as an opinion of the speaker. The initiative is credited instead to the management group. It is also the management group that, according to Jouko, has provided the reason for the task, particularly its connection to the strategy text.

We can conclude that in his turn of talk Jouko constructs a chain of strategic activities: the strategy text, the meeting of the management group, and the customer satisfaction survey. All of these are also representatives of activity types. At the same time, the meeting itself is turned into a node in the chain; it is made a part of the strategizing process. Hence, the meeting participants also become strategists for this part of the meeting. All of this happens in a situated way. It is through the talk of the participants that strategizing enters into the meeting.

4.2 The agency of activity types in the strategizing process

As earlier analyses (Cooren, 2008, 2010; Vaara, Sorsa and Pälli, 2010) have suggested, texts are often presented as agents. Our contention is that agency can be connected to activity types. We can begin with the strategy text and look at the role it is given through the talk. We mentioned in the previous section that it guides action. We can now look at the power issue in more detail.

Jouko uses the verb ‘require’ in talking about the strategy text. Furthermore, it is the text that is the subject of the sentence; the texts ‘requires’. Hence, he presents the strategy text as having power vis-à-vis the participants. However, we can also ask why this particular text has power. We can argue that its power lies in its generic characteristics, in it being representative of an activity type (cf. Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010). It has power precisely because it is a strategy text; strategy texts in general are seen in organizations as agents that have the power to set requirements.

¹ The name of the text has been changed to protect the anonymity of the corporation.



The management group is different as an activity type because it does not exist as a text; it is instead a type of spoken encounter. In this case Jouko attributes agency to “they” (line 12). It is “they” that “have reasons” for doing what they do. The plural pronoun “they” refers to a group of people. However, the power of “they” originates in the activity type “management group.” It is because their discussion has been conducted in the management group meeting that “they” have the right to initiate action. It is noteworthy that the other participants do not call into question the agency of the strategy text and the management group meeting. They seem to accept it as a fact.

4.3 Participatory rights in activity types

We can also see how participation in strategic action is oriented to in the meeting. Participation seems to be connected to the activity types: they open up different possibilities and roles for participation.

We can first look at how Jouko talks about the “management group.” It has been shown in conversation analytical research (e.g. Drew, 1991; Heritage and Raymond, 2005) that participants in interaction display their access to information and knowledge and that there are normative restrictions on what different participants are entitled to know and describe. In lines 4-6 Jouko first makes an explicit statement about different states of knowledge. He describes himself as less knowledgeable than the chair. Then, in lines 6-7, in mentioning the management group, he uses the phrase “I understand.” Hence he shows that he does not have direct access to the discussion in the management group.

In this case, we can also analyze the nonverbal aspects of the interaction. In line 1, when he gives the turn to Jouko, Johan lifts his gaze and looks at Jouko. When he starts speaking in line 2, Jouko gathers his papers and walks around to get his transparencies from the other end of the table. He has reached the front of the table when he utters “I understand it was discussed in the management group.” At this moment he turns his gaze to Johan, who also, a bit later, turns his gaze to Jouko for a little while. Hence, through his gaze, he shows that the chair has better access to the management group as an activity type. Thus, the participants’ participatory roles vis-à-vis strategic activity types are displayed in a situated way in the meeting.

A related but different distribution of roles can be seen in another activity type. Extract 2 follows a moment after extract 1.

Extract 2

33 Jouko: but nevertheless I was then er given the the
34 the task to co-ordinate this er from Johan (.)
35 and er making contacts with the units,

In extract 2 Jouko describes the activity of Johan giving him a task. This activity is also representative of an organizational activity type. Even though Jouko does not use a conventional name of a genre or an activity type, the description of the activity has generic qualities. ‘Task-giving,’ the purpose of the activity, is both generic and important in the organizational context; managers recurrently give tasks to employees and the task-giving has consequences for the operation of the organization.

This activity, and consequently the activity type, is also connected to institutional roles and thus to an institutional distribution of participatory rights. In contrast to the management



group, Jouko presents his access to the activity as direct: he is a participant in the activity. However, the participants in the activity are shown to have different roles. One of them gives the task, another receives it. Thus, the activity type of task-giving entails a hierarchical organizational structure of superiors and subordinates.

Finally, we will analyze how the participation structures are constructed in the activity types of strategy text and customer satisfaction survey. We will return to extract 1. As far as the strategy text is concerned, it is interesting that Jouko's monologue is broken up for a moment when he is talking about it. The other participants offer their contributions as to its content and meaning. In lines 16-19 Jouko describes the requirements of the strategy text. However, in lines 18-19, there are several perturbations in his speech: word repetition, a cut-off word, a long pause, a word search marked by 'er.' Also, during the word 'concrete' (line 19) he extends his hand, palm up, towards Raija and nods slightly at her. As Lerner (1996) has shown, such features provide an opportunity for others – in this case particularly Raija – to help and complete the turn. This is what they do. Both Raija (line 20) and Seppo (line 22) provide a version of the end of the turn. On line 21 Jouko confirms Raija's version of the turn. Such collaborative turns – that continue the format of the turn thus far, bring the turn to completion, and project confirmation by the original speaker – are affiliative (Lerner, 2004; see also Sacks, 1992: 144–147). Hence, by constructing the turn together the participants display that they have common access to the strategy text. The text has, of course, been written through a particular procedure by particular people, but as a complete text it is available to the participants of the meeting.

The stretch of talk analyzed above is also relevant for participatory rights on the activity type of customer satisfaction survey. The customer satisfaction survey is different from the other activity types considered above in that it does not yet exist as a specific text. The participants are constructing a specific customer satisfaction survey, but in so doing all they can rely on is their knowledge of the activity type. In lines 16-19 Jouko is not merely talking about the requirements of the strategy text, but also about their applicability to the customer satisfaction survey. The other participants – particularly Raija and Seppo – are doing the same. Hence, the participants display their common knowledge of the activity type; it is one that produces concrete data and facts. They thereby gain the right to participate in the discussion of the activity type because they know it by name and what it should entail. Such knowledge is also implicated by the chair in his opening (line 1). He merely states the name of the activity type without any explanation of what it comprises. He therefore indicates that the participants obviously know what is being talked about.

4.4 Strategizing as part of meeting interaction

In this section we will show how the references to activity types and the strategizing connected to them are embedded in meeting interaction. To do that, we need to look at Jouko's turn as a sequentially relevant contribution in the meeting. We already noted that it follows the chair's opening of the agenda issue and is followed by discussion of the issue. In this section, we will focus on how it is designed to project the upcoming discussion.

Our extracts come from the beginning of the introduction, which Jouko frames as "background" to the issue. At the end of this part he makes an explicit topical shift: *this is this is the background (.) how is it going now (.) er I sent a letter*. He thereby shows that the background part of the introduction is now finished and he is ready to turn to the present state of the project.



Framing his description as ‘background’ seems to imply that this section of the introduction is mainly informative. It is something the participants need to know to be able to understand what is being talked about, but it is not the main point to be discussed in the meeting. As we have seen, the background part includes references to many different more or less generic linguistic activities. However, earlier research (e.g. Arminen, 2005; Drew, 1992) has shown that describing is never neutral. First of all, a description is always just one version of what happened. And secondly, every description is embedded in an activity, in doing something. In many cases, it can be said that descriptions are strategic in nature (Arminen, 2005: 139–145). “Strategic” is used here in a slightly different sense than in the organizational strategy literature and otherwise in this article. The idea is that describing is done to enhance specific goals in the interaction. In this sense, it is interesting to note that references to different activities and activity types in our data also seem to have a persuasive function. We will concentrate on references to three different activities: the management group meeting (extract 1), the strategy document (extract 1), and Jouko’s “making contacts with the units” (extract 3 below).

The reference to management group (extract 1, line 7) is made in a quite neutral way. Jouko states that the issue was ‘discussed’ in the management group. He does not refer to any decision of the group. The apparent neutrality of the reference means that its significance is left for the participants to interpret. They must draw on their knowledge of the role of ‘management group meetings’ as a generic activity type in the corporation. With the help of such knowledge the role of the reference can be seen and appreciated. If the management group is seen as representative of top management, the reference is seen as legitimizing vis-à-vis the task at hand.

The reference to the strategy document (extract 1, lines 16-17) is more explicitly legitimizing. Jouko is talking about the “reasons” for concentrating on customer satisfaction. He presents ‘self-assessment’ as an important reason and then connects it to the strategy document. He uses the evidential expression *according to* (line 4), with which he shows that the strategy document is the source of his statement. He also summarizes the relevant part of the document.

Thus, the strategy document is used in a situated way to legitimize a particular activity in the meeting. The success of the legitimization, of course, relies on the participants’ knowledge of the organizational meaning and importance of the document. Through continuing Jouko’s utterance (lines 20, 22) the participants display both their knowledge and their appreciation of the power of the document.

In extract 3, to close his presentation of the ‘background,’ Jouko describes the results of his contacts with the units. This reference to an activity type is different from the previous two in that it is more explicitly evaluative.

Extract 3

35 Jouko: and er making contacts with the units, er
36 there were two er a few er things to be
37 noticed, (.) first the er response was spe-
38 very positive, (.) all saw that there are (.)
39 undoubt- er doubt- undoubtedly e:r- benefits
40 in a more or less concerted action,



41 Seppo: M[m
 42 Jouko: [And and some put it in words of course the
 43 fact that if you send (.) er a questionnaire
 44 (.) from (.) different units to the same
 45 person, let's say (.) two questionnaires per
 46 week or, one er the er thi- the the (.) next
 47 week then they have the right to ask don't
 48 these guys er talk to each other,
 49 (.)
 50 Anders: Mm[hm.
 51 Jouko: [Because er er (.) they might get pissed
 52 off to fill out (.) all kind of kinds of forms,
 53 (1.2) er that was one thing. (.) second thing
 54 was that they (.) welcomed (.) er our (.)
 55 offer of help, (0.3) we are not er you know
 56 er we are not saying that er and were not
 57 saying that we know everything already but we
 58 have (.) happen to have a little bit more
 59 experience maybe (.) in these kind of er of of
 60 service, =and they said very good (.) the timing
 61 is perfect, because they actually wondered what
 62 shall be should be done, .hh and er and then
 63 (.) er thirdly (.) they appreciated er the
 64 degree of freedom which we a- actually
 65 guaranteed from the very beginning, this is I
 66 mean if somebody wants to have a (.) you know
 67 individual approach e::r- or or or or
 68 something extra of course it is possible, (.)
 69 but er hmmm (0.8) this is this is the
 70 background.

Making contacts with units undoubtedly entails various linguistic activities. Importantly, these activities are not described in any detail. Jouko does not, for example, describe the form of the contacts: were they made by mail, e-mail, or telephone? It can be argued, however, that the description 'making contacts' is sufficient for practical purposes. It adequately describes the purpose of the activity: the units have had an opportunity for a say in the process. It is also an interesting description because it portrays the discussions with the units as preliminary.

On lines 36-70, Jouko describes the results of the preliminary contacts. The description is given in list form. The list is anticipated in the beginning (lines 36-37) and made explicit throughout the description: *first* (line 37), *second thing* (line 53), *thirdly* (line 63). The list consists of descriptions of how the units responded to the issue. These responses are not, however, verbatim citations of what someone said in a particular speech situation. Rather, they are generalizations of multiple responses. Jouko describes the sources of the descriptions as *all* (line 38), *some* (line 42) and *they* (lines 54, 63).

Jouko's description of the responses depicts them in a very positive way. In the beginning, he explicates this positiveness: *the response was very positive* (lines 37-38). Later, when he describes the response of the units, he frames it in a positive way: *all saw that there are – benefits* (lines 38-39), *they welcomed* (line 54), *they appreciated* (line 63). For example, the expression *they welcomed our offer for help* (lines 54-55) is a gloss of a multitude of responses from the units. Hence, we can also say that it gathers together a group of linguistic activities. What Jouko chooses to say about those activities is that they reflect a positive



attitude towards the project. Later (lines 60-61) he illustrates this positiveness with an expression that seems like a citation. But even there he uses the pronoun *they*. Hence, it is not clear whether he means it as a verbatim citation or a gloss of many responses.

As we earlier noted, a description is always a particular version of the events. Interestingly, Jouko's descriptions point to the fact that a different version is possible. If we look at his third point (lines 63-68), in which he explains that the units appreciate being able to adopt individual approaches in the customer satisfaction survey issue, we can detect a potential discrepancy between this point and the second one, which concerns the units' appreciation for the offer of help. The third point could be seen to imply that not all of the units welcomed the offer wholeheartedly. Hence, it seems that Jouko constructs a specifically positive version of their responses. By so doing, he also constructs the task of the meeting participants as reasonable and beneficial.

It is perhaps not coincidental that the contacts with units are described in a more explicitly evaluative way than the management group and the strategy document. As activity types, the management group and the strategy document can be thought of as more obviously relevant. It can be expected that the participants know their role. The meaning and significance of the response from the units, however, demands more explication.

To conclude the analysis, in describing the 'background' of the task at hand Jouko informs the participants of a chain of linguistic events that precede the meeting. The 'informing,' however, is clearly persuasive. He thereby constructs a particular version of the events: the process has been initiated by the upper management, it is in line with a central strategy document, it has been legitimated by middle management, and it is unanimously welcomed by the units of the organization. Also, the task is constructed as part of the strategy work of the organization. In a way, the strategy of the organization and Jouko's strategic action during the meeting are combined in Jouko's turn. By constructing the task of the participants as part of corporate strategizing, he reaches his interactional goal: in effect, the meeting participants can only view the task as both beneficial and necessary. If they want to enhance the strategic goals of the organization, they need to take the task seriously. And through their action, both during Jouko's turn as we have seen in the analysis and afterwards when they enter into a discussion on the customer satisfaction survey, they display their understanding of the significance of the task.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Several studies within strategy-as-practice research have acknowledged the potential of the conversation analytical approach for the investigation of strategizing (e.g. Laine and Vaara, 2007; Mantere and Vaara, 2008). Nevertheless, the method has seldom been used in actual empirical analyses. Ethnomethodological conversation analysis does, however, contribute directly to important theoretical and methodological issues that have concerned strategy-as-practice scholars. In particular, it sheds new light on practitioners whose doings, as Chia and MacKay (2007) convincingly argue, have been typically explained in terms of methodological individualism. In contrast, ethnomethodological conversation analysis deals with structured and organized human action and does not seek explanations from 'inside' the individuals, but rather from their situated social activity. This notwithstanding, ethnomethodological conversation analysis answers the call for more active involvement of practitioners (Balogun, Huff and Johnson, 2003) as its analytical orientation concentrates on how the participants themselves design their turns for each other and interpret each other's turns.



In addressing the question of practitioners' resources, earlier discursive research (e.g. Laine and Vaara, 2007; Samra-Fredericks, 2003) has drawn attention to the fact that discourse is a resource for strategists. Our analysis elaborated on this stance by calling attention to the various activity types – recurring ways of acting discursively – that are referenced in situated interaction. We showed that these activity types are in fact linguistic interactions with generic qualities and that the participants draw upon the activity types during situated interaction. Most importantly, we pointed out that a specific episode, here a managerial meeting, is constructed as a strategy meeting through invoking activity types. We can thus argue that generic activity types shape the flow of strategy activity by linking different strategic episodes to each other. Above all, we saw that when the participants invoked activity types, they actually aligned with the strategy and made their task at hand a part of strategy.

Our analysis also suggested that activity types are employed in the recontextualization practices of strategizing. It is through them that strategy is constructed and given sense. In concrete terms, we showed that through their action the participants of the meeting demonstrated that activity types have consequences for their strategizing. Hence, activity types are powerful for them. This observation of agency is in line with other research (Vaara, Sorsa and Pälli 2010), which have shown, for example, that strategy documents have textual agency. Based on our analysis, we also argue that specific texts have agency. However, our analysis also emphasized that textual agency is tied to the general characteristics of a particular linguistic interaction – whether text or talk – and thus the power and agency is realized through activity types.

Existing literature has demonstrated how various potential sources of authority, such as texts, are made present and powerful in situated interaction (Benoit-Barné and Cooren, 2009; Cooren et al., 2007; Vaara, Sorsa and Pälli, 2010). This study adds to this previous literature by emphasizing that the power and agency of dislocated activity types or any sources that “ventriloquate” comes about when people in interaction demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of them, which they do on the basis of the individual representatives of activity types. Thus, this study makes a methodological contribution by proposing an approach that views ventriloquation as a members' phenomenon, an interactional accomplishment.

In addition, our analysis sheds light on the question of participatory rights in strategizing. We suggest that participation is differentiated vis-à-vis different activity types. Also, participation is something that the actors display and construct in a situated way in their interaction with each other. The actors show their access to different activity types through their verbal and nonverbal actions. In so doing they also display and construct their position in the organizational hierarchy.

Earlier research (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003) has drawn attention to persuasiveness of strategists' talk in their day-to-day and minute-to-minute work. Our analysis shows how persuasive discourse uses references to activity types. Through the activity types a particular persuasive version of the task at hand is presented. Thus, our analysis suggests that the study of persuasive practices in organizations would benefit from a consideration of the webs of linguistic organizational activities, the knowledge embedded in the activities and their interactional use by members of organizations.



We believe that our analysis has also enhanced our understanding of how intertextuality plays out in strategy work. We demonstrated that even a single short sequence of interaction includes a variety of intertextual references to specific texts or spoken interactions (manifest intertextuality) and genres as activity types (constitutive intertextuality). Both kinds of intertextuality constitute strategy work as a discursive enterprise; the former kind of intertextuality contributes to local sensemaking and sensegiving, whereas the latter kind of intertextuality contributes to the order of strategy discourse. In other words, strategy is talked about by drawing on various texts and speech events, and it is talked up under the conditions of their generic qualities and other linguistic interactions.

We believe, however, that further studies would benefit from gathering data on a set of activity types in an organization and conducting a careful analysis of how strategy is recontextualized in them. This would make it possible to analyze how exactly macro-level strategy discourse is constructed through a series of interconnected linguistic interactions with which managers do their work of situated sensegiving and sensemaking.



6 References

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