

Strategy as discourse

77E00200 Strategy Communication



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20.1.2020

Agenda

- **Addressing the notion of strategy discourse**
 - Their academic and practical underpinnings: why and how to approach strategy as discourse
- **Discussing the elements of strategy discourse – with an aim of learning to analyze (strategy) discourse**

Why should we know anything about strategy discourse – or why should we analyze strategy discourse, (or the language of strategy, or people "talking strategy")?

- To understand what is strategy (the way people talk about strategy reveals what strategy is for them)
- To understand the underlying (and socially constructed) ways of conceiving of strategies
- To, if need be, not only analyze and reveal but also critically make use of structures of strategy discourse (e.g. to produce an adequate strategic plan)

Discourse defined

- Two **interconnected** levels
 - 1) Discourse = Used as a label for any use of language (text or talk)
 - When you analyze discourse, you analyze text/talk
 - 2) Discourse = Used as a label for some specific set of beliefs and ideas and ways of thinking (e.g. European discourse, dog-owner discourse, college student discourse, the right-wing discourse...)
 - When you analyze discourse, you analyze the underlying ideas, ideologies, beliefs, certainties/uncertainties... > particularities (within that discourse) in the ways of representing the world

Studying strategy discourse

- Doctrine and discipline of *strategic* management: its underlying ideas, ideologies, beliefs etc. which appear and are visible in the language of strategy
- Discourse is maintained through discourse practices (lectures teaching about strategy, textbooks on strategy, organizational strategy plans)
- Discourse practices entail a discourse community, i.e. those who participate in and reproduce discourse practices
- Studying these practices means studying the worldview, action orientations, assumptions, beliefs, ideologies – “the body of knowledge” held by the discourse community
- Discourses change over time

Strategy discourse studies

- Analysis of texts or conversations with an effort to understand underlying social structures or patterns in strategy work
- Using *discourse data*
 - **Interviews**: how people talk about strategy and strategic issues, thus "talking into being" certain conceptions about strategy (what does their talk tell about strategy?)
 - **Real-time conversations** (e.g. meetings): how does the talk-in-interaction and whatever happens in interaction inform us about strategy, or how is the interactional behavior consequential e.g. in terms of strategy making?
 - **Strategy texts** (strategic plans/official documents) or other strategic texts): how they encode strategy, how they "sell" (communicate) the company strategy, what underlying assumptions there are in the text etc.
 - (Often the discourse data are viewed as narratives)

One slide guide on analyzing discourse

- Data: any strategy text (e.g. a formal strategic plan, mission statement, visual representation of strategy...)
- Starting with observing textual characteristics: e.g.
 - Characteristics of vocabulary
 - Metaphors and similes (figures of speech)
 - Argumentation (how the text aims to convince its audience)
 - Register or genre features of text (some strategy texts may sound like academic reports, some may sound like pieces of advertisement)
 - People and processes: active or passive voice? What kinds of processes (doings) are there? Who are the ones (people or organizations) depicted as “doers” and what “traits” are assigned to them, who are the ones named as recipients of action etc.?
- From observations to analysis: interpretation based on textual observations

Example strategy discourse study. Analysis of text

- Pälli et al. (2009) analyzed a specific strategy text (a strategic plan)
- Textual analysis revealed 'education', 'self-legitimation', 'guiding future action', 'building identity' and 'promotion' as key components in the strategy text
- (Later discursive analyses (Cornut, Giroux, and Langley, 2012) have brought out how strategy texts share some core textual characteristics with horoscope texts...)

(Pälli, P., Vaara, E. & Sorsa, V. (2009) Strategy as Text and Discursive Practice. A Genre-Based Approach to Strategizing in City Administration. *Discourse & Communication* 3(3).)

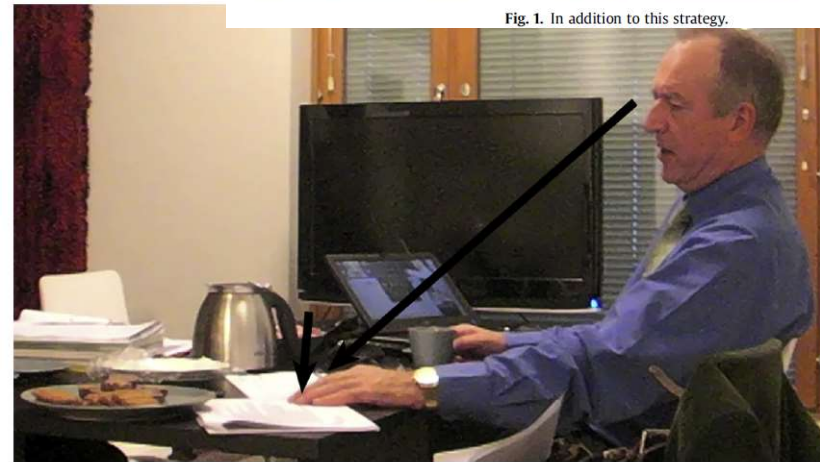
Example. Analysis of talk-in-interaction

- Pälli (2018) analyzed managers' one-on-one "leadership conversations"
- His analysis demonstrated the importance of "material agency" in strategy work and the need to give strategy a concrete form

(Pälli, P. (2018) Ascribing materiality and agency to strategy in interaction: A language-based approach to the material agency of strategy. *Long Range Planning*, 51, 3.)



Fig. 1. In addition to this strategy.



Features of strategy discourse

Elements identified in existing strategy-as-discourse research (e.g. Knights & Morgan, 1991)

- Masculinity, muscularity
 - Men's "business"
- Militaristic
 - Art of a general, 'men in the field', "troops", 'frontlines', 'must-win-battles'...
- About competition
 - Winning and losing
- Manager-centred and individualistic
 - Manager as an individual hero, strategy discourse provides managers identities and power positions)
- Western=American post-war ideals of productivity in industry
- Scienticity, measurability, conceptuality (ideals of technical-rational and positivistic science and worldview)
- Spirituality (about faith, almost like religious creeds)

Some "normative" viewpoints – what is (textually and rhetorically) good in strategy text

- Future-oriented language
- Categorical or firm (and strong) certainty
- Firm belief (cf. religious confessions of faith)
- Superlativeness (the best, the most...)
- Catchy metaphors and slogans
- Rhetoric of repeating important slogans or other expressions as key messages
- Building commitment through affiliative language (e.g. we-pronouns)
- Giving people a central place in the text (not for example 'money')
- Answering the contextual social expectations (e.g today, everyone is socially responsible and doing business sustainably)
- Having a good mixture of "spirituality" (togetherness and faith and "mystery") and "theory" (numbers, charts, scientific-like concepts)
- A story-form

Exercise.

- Find and read through any organization's strategy text (e.g. a search phrase "our strategy"). (It may well be the organization on which you do your group work)
- After reading it, consider its textual characteristics and features of strategy discourse
- Use approx. 10 mins. for this on your own
- Phase 2: Compare what you saw in the text in small groups: try to map out some similarities. What do these similarities tell about strategy?
- Approx. 10 mins. group discussion
- General discussion in the main room