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# Ascribing materiality and agency to strategy in interaction: A language-based approach to the material agency of strategy

Pekka Pälli

Aalto University School of Business, Department of Management Studies, FI-00076, Aalto, Finland

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### ABSTRACT

Adding to the existent research on strategy as discourse and practice, this paper develops a language-based approach to viewing the agency and materiality of strategy. The study draws insights from the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) approach and linguistic agency to investigate how organizational members ascribe materiality and performative agency to strategy in their talk-in-interaction. The data consist of 14 video-recorded dyadic manager-to-manager conversations from one private and one public Finnish organization. The findings highlight how strategy is habitually spoken of as a material concrete entity and as a nonhuman agent that makes a difference in the course of described actions. The findings thus suggest that the performative position of strategy has been encoded in language and its use, which further suggests that object-like concreteness and agentivity are key elements of the organizational strategy discourse.

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### Introduction

The word “strategy” pervades all contemporary organizations. Often, the word denotes something that organizations have (“our strategy”, “we have a strategy”), something that they use as an instrument (“our strategy helped us achieve our objectives”), or something that they, for example, construct or make (“after all the hard work, our strategy is finally ready”). Regarding agency in particular, it is noteworthy that strategy is oftentimes talked about as an agent, capable of doing things. For example, sentences such as “The strategy changed our whole organization” or “The strategy made me think differently” seem perfectly plausible, even though they represent action undertaken by an inanimate or material entity.

Inanimate agency and the role of materiality in strategy work have received increasing attention from scholars connecting strategy and strategy discourse with (socio) material practices (Balogun et al., 2014; Dameron et al., 2015; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). In particular, empirical studies in the field of strategy-as-practice and discourse have shown how material practices such as seating arrangements (Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002) and the situated use of pictures, maps, data packs, spreadsheets and graphs (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), as well as material representations such as PowerPoint presentations (Kaplan, 2011) or formal written strategic plans (Vaara et al., 2010) can gain agency and thus affect the participation in the situated interactional events and the more overarching organizational strategizing activities. Furthermore, research that has concentrated on the talk-in-interaction in strategizing events has pointed out that this talk makes use of and is oriented to different material means – such as agendas, documents, and various objects and artifacts – that are available for participants in different strategy meetings (Cooren et al., 2015; Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2005; Sorsa et al., 2014).

*E-mail address:* [pekka.palli@aalto.fi](mailto:pekka.palli@aalto.fi).

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Yet, one specific aspect regarding *how* materiality matters has received little attention thus far; that is, how strategy itself features as an object-like material entity in conventionalized forms of talking about strategy. As will be shown in this paper, by focusing on these conventional patterns of linguistic structure and use, we can throw new light on the material agency of strategy, which, in part, informs us about the characteristics and performative potential of the strategy discourse.

As regards the theoretical notions of agency and performativity, the paper draws insights from recent ‘communicative constitution of organization’ (CCO) theory (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011) which has propounded that, in order to understand how communication constitutes organization, we should seriously take into account the material aspects of both the communication and the agents (and other actors and actants) in communicative events. In particular, the CCO approach informs the present paper by offering theoretical tools to conceptualize the relationship between human agency and the material agency of strategy (Cooren et al., 2011, 2015; Kuhn, 2008). Furthermore, the study follows CCO thinking in its conception of the performativity of strategy: in addressing the constitutive role of language and communication in what strategy is and what it and its material representations do, the conception of performativity is broadened and extended from how *people do things* with words (Austin, 1962) to how *things do things* with words (Cooren and Matte, 2010).

In keeping with the CCO approach, the study articulates a view that advances existing discursive understandings of strategy. This view acknowledges the potentiality of both human and nonhuman participants, and their entanglement, to make a difference to how strategy work unfolds. More broadly, the paper contributes to the strategy as discourse and practice literature by responding to the call for more research into how strategy discourse combines with the material and physical; e.g. objects, artifacts, and bodily practices (Balogun et al., 2014; Dameron et al., 2015). In addition, the paper makes a methodological contribution by introducing original ideas of approaching the agency of strategy from a language perspective, by concentrating on the linguistic and semantic aspects of linguistic representation.

Drawing upon the data from dyadic, one-to-one (manager-to-manager) ‘leadership conversations’ video-recorded in two Finnish organizations, this study addresses the following research questions:

- How are material and object-like meanings of strategy constructed and mobilized during interactions?
- How does strategy as a textual-material artifact perform its agency when treated as a participant in discourse?

In addressing these questions, the study presents and discusses findings from an analysis of how the managers in interaction both verbally and nonverbally ascribed different meanings to strategy. First, however, I present the theoretical background regarding human and material agency, with a particular emphasis on how inanimate “things” can be seen to exert agency.

### Human agency and material agency

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in material practices, objects and artifacts in organizational contexts in general and in the context of strategy work in particular. Individual case studies have shown how people use e.g. PowerPoint presentations (Kaplan, 2011), maps and graphs (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), Lego bricks (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008), texts (Vaara et al., 2010) and visuals (Denis et al., 2006) as important tools in organizational strategy work. Also, extant studies have highlighted the important role of material practices such as seating arrangements (Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002), or gestural and bodily behaviors in physical space (Balogun et al., 2015) in terms of strategic sensemaking and strategy realization.

Existing studies in this field thus have demonstrated that material and physical artifacts, objects, and practices matter in strategy work. Broadly, they can be seen to echo Bruno Latour’s (2005) well-known conceptualization of ‘actor’ and ‘actant’; in this conceptualization, “any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or if it has no figuration yet, an actant” (Latour, 2005, p. 71).<sup>1</sup> However, previous studies have tended to emphasize the role of human agency over the ‘material’ they have investigated (cf. Cooren et al., 2015 for a similar observation). In other words, the focus has been on how different materialities shape the way human actants can be participants in action and have agency.

Hence, earlier research on how materiality matters in strategy work is consistent with common views of agency, which hold that agency is a property of human or other animate beings that have control over their own behavior and a capacity to act by volition and intentionally (Ahearn, 2001; Duranti, 2001). Within this frame of thought, all things that make things happen or are participants in the action are not agents. Instead, models of depicting agency, building from the logic of philosophy and linguistic studies of meaning, distinguish between agency (of intentional actors) and non-volitional causers or forces and instruments that cause things to happen but do so unintentionally (e.g. natural forces such as ‘wind blows’ or causers that do not have an internal energy source, such as “The key opened the door”) (Dowty, 1991; Fillmore, 1968; Frawley, 1992).

<sup>1</sup> For Latour (2005), ‘actant’ – a concept he has adopted from narrative and semiotic studies – means basically anything that acts, and ‘actor’ has a more specific meaning as an actant having a figuration, i.e. actors are endowed by some form or shape, however vague (Latour, 2005, p. 53). I will here use the term ‘actant’ in a broad sense, which also covers the actants that can be considered to have a figuration. However, consistent with the standard linguistic terminology adopted in the empirical analysis in this paper, I will also use the term ‘participant’ (and ‘participant role’) to refer to the semantic roles of the constituents in linguistic description and ‘actor’ as a generalization across the semantic roles of ‘agent’, ‘instrument’, ‘effector’ and other acting (or actor) roles.

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