

Succeeding programmes, failed projects: A lexicographical analysis of a disputed semantic terrain

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Abstract

This paper proposes that projects and programmes can be empirically distinguished by the way in which they are associated with expectations and evaluations of success and failure. Support for the proposition is grounded in analysis of over sixteen hundred examples of occurrences of the terms ‘project’ and ‘programme’ with ‘success’ and ‘failure’ derived from the Oxford English Corpus (OEC). The OEC is a structured and coded database of over two billion words of naturally occurring English collected from the World Wide Web. The analysis highlights that project and programme are each modified by the terms ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in significantly different ways, indicating that they are conceptually distinct phenomena. These findings imply that academics must be cautious in their use of language in investigations of project and programme evaluations, and that practitioners should consider the implications of considering programmes as ‘scaled-up’ projects, given their propensity to different evaluation outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The claim that society is becoming more ‘projectified’ (Davies and Hobday, 2005; Hodgson, 2004; Midler, 1995; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007) and ‘programmified’ (Maylor et al., 2006) is supported by numerous studies (Arvidsson, 2009; Ekstedt, 1999; Soderlund, 2004) and by supplementary observations relating to phenomena such as the diffusion of project and programme management practices, the preferences of different sectors for each term (Artto et al., 2009) and the associated professionalisation of project and programme managers (Hodgson, 2002; Styhre, 2006). It is against this backdrop of the proliferation of new modes of organising that the labelling of different organisational phenomena such as

networks, projects and programmes has taken on significance beyond semantics. It has therefore become a consideration both for practitioners working within these organisations, and for researchers keen to understand the social significance of these developments.

To this end, Pellegrinelli (2011) has provided an insightful overview of the development of the debate as to the difference between projects and programmes. He first identifies how programme management is often thought of as a capability or management approach, citing the US Aerospace industry, the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) guidelines in the UK, and the P2M guidelines in Japan as examples. Such instances “... attribute to programmes a broader role and meaning encompassing the initiation and shaping of projects (Pellegrinelli, 1997) and a broader process for the realisation of broader strategic or tactical benefits (Murray-Webster and Thiry, 2000)” (p.233). Next, he outlines the position of professional bodies that tend to frame programme management as a coordinating activity, taking into

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account contextual factors such as stakeholder management and a focus on outcomes and benefits rather than outputs or deliverables. In this sense, programme management is an activity that is explicitly directed at managing complexity, uncertainty and multiple sources of risk. Programme management therefore is a distinctively different endeavour from orthodox conceptions of project management and, crucially, not simply an extension or ‘scaled-up’ version of it. Yet, despite this emerging consensus that projects and programmes are substantially distinct entities, drawing on Stretton (2009), Pellegrinelli (2011) notes “Sometimes the words project and programme are used interchangeably.” (p.234) This observation, in turn, leads him to ask the important question “What are the implications of labelling an initiative, set of activities or working arrangement as a programme rather than a project?” (p.235)

In this paper, we wish to shed light on this question by examining what the implications of labelling initiatives, activities or working arrangements as programmes or projects are in terms of expectations and evaluations of success and failure. In doing so, we connect the debate on the distinction between projects and programmes with another major debate in project and programme management research and practice: that of success and failure. As several recent studies have shown, there is no common definition of success or failure in the project management journals (Ika, 2009; Thomas and Fernandez, 2008). This observation is echoed by Jugdev and Muller’s (2005) finding that, for practitioners, the understanding of these terms evolves over time and moreover, the relative proportion of project and programme successes and failures depends on issues of definition, measurement and interpretation. Similar results are reported in other recent studies on the distinction between long-term project success and short-term project management success, as reported by Cooke-Davies (2002) and Lim and Zain Mohamed (1999). Other research goes still further and suggests that project and programme success is simply a matter of perception (Baccarini, 1999; Flyvbjerg et al., 2003).

Within this literature, significant effort has also been directed at identifying the factors contributing to project and programme success and failure (see e.g., Pinto and Mantel, 1990; Murphy et al., 1974). These investigations have yielded valuable insights, with the increasing specification of factors leading to the development of contingency approaches for success measurement (Shenhar, 2001; Shenhar and Bonen, 1997; Shenhar et al., 2001). However, an important issue in such research relates to the level of analysis and data that are employed. Many of the investigations to date into project or programme success and failure have been conducted at a sectoral level of analysis, with particular focus on the fields of information technology (see e.g., Sumner, 2000; Wateridge, 1995), infrastructure (see e.g., Flyvbjerg et al., 2003), and product development (see e.g., Royer, 2003). Collectively, what the research to date shows is that the evaluation of project or programme success and failure is a multi-dimensional issue with many potential levels of analysis.

In this paper we take a different approach to exploring the difference between projects and programmes. We move away from a focus on specific projects, programmes, or sectors and instead empirically focus on how the phenomena of projects and

programmes, broadly conceived and manifest in actual language use, are associated with the concepts of success and failure. By taking this approach we are able to explore whether the generic technical distinctions between projects and programmes articulated in the professional literature are reflected in the everyday language of many different users, or whether the two phenomena are typically conflated in practice. It is important to note at this juncture that we are not adopting an *a priori* definition of project or programme derived from the academic or professional literature. Instead our aim is to explore the behaviour of the terms project and programme as they are actually used in the English language at large. The benefit of this approach is that we access, at a broad level, the conceptual distinctions between these phenomena at a societal level. The subsequent limitation, however, is that it does not permit the fine-grained level of analysis that would enable us to distinguish, or make comparisons between, different kinds of projects and programmes.

The paper proceeds by describing our methodological approach and analysis. This is followed by our detailed findings and a discussion of the implications of the results for researchers and practitioners.

2. Methods

Although uncommon in the project management literature (see Arto et al., 2009 for a notable exception), management and organisation theorists have an established history of interest in the way that language represents and helps us to understand organisations and organisational phenomena (e.g., Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Astley and Zammuto, 1992). This has included discourse analyses of texts such as corporate reports and analysis of management fads and fashions (e.g., Abrahamson and Hambrick, 1997; Barley et al., 1998), content analyses to assess changes in managerial cognition (Carley, 1997; Duriau et al., 2007; Gephart, 1993, 1997) and metaphor to understand perceptions of organisation (e.g., Cornelissen, 2005; Tsoukas, 1991). To date, these studies have typically focussed on single texts, or textual discourses within a particular register or organisation, rather than looking at broader societal use of language. Our approach builds on this tradition of analysing language to understand organisational phenomena and extends it both methodologically through the application of a lexicographical corpus linguistics approach and in a disciplinary sense by applying it to the organisational phenomena of projects and programmes.

Building on this tradition, we began our study by clarifying our hypotheses. The hypothesised relationship between the terms programme and project with success and failure arose from the literature previously discussed on project and programme success and failure, in which we expected that projects and programmes would behave similarly when modified by the terms success and failure. In addition, insights from Beaume et al. (2008), Midler and Silberzahn (2008) and Lenfle (2010), which collectively highlight that the tensions on the management of individual projects are similar to the challenges of coordinating in multi-project environments. This reaffirmed our expectation that there would be little difference in the evaluation and expectation of outcomes associated with them, indicated by their collocation

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