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Strategy as language and communication: Theoretical and methodological advances and avenues for the future in strategy process and practice research

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Abstract

Research Summary: The purpose of this introduction to the SMS collection is to take stock of advances in language-based analyses of strategic processes and practices with an eye on the theoretical and methodological insights and opportunities. After a review of the articles included, we develop a framework that identifies four perspectives ranging from the more micro to the macro: (a) microlevel conceptual basis of strategy discourse, (b) use of language in strategy work processes in their socio-material and multimodal contexts, (c) use of language and especially narratives in long-term processes of strategic change, and (d) the rhetorical and discursive reconstruction of organizational strategies in their historical contexts. We then move on to offer a set of research opportunities and questions to form an agenda for future research.

Managerial Summary: This article takes stock of recent research on the role of language and communication in strategic decision-making and strategy work. The key argument is that we should not treat language merely as a window into other aspects of strategic phenomena but as a central means through which strategies are shaped and made sense of. The paper underscores that language use is a crucial part of strategy work and strategic change—to be

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taken seriously in its own right in research as well as practice. Another key point is that we need to develop better understanding of the new communication technologies and media that play a key role in contemporary organizations. The new theoretical ideas and methods may also inspire practitioners to develop their communication practices.

KEYWORDS

communication, language, practice, process, strategy

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen an increasing interest in the role of language, discourse, and communication in strategy research (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Mantere, 2013; Vaara & Langley, 2021). This interest reflects a more general “language turn” in organization and management research (Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015). It should not be dismissed as a “fad” or “curiosity” but as development that can greatly advance our understanding of strategy as a social and organizational activity involving interaction between different actors in various arenas. Even though the role of communication has become an important theme in various streams of strategy research, we have seen an increasing interest in language especially in strategy process and practice studies that deal with the social and organizational aspects of strategy (Burgelman et al., 2018; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2015).

By strategic processes, we mean the various dynamics that play out over time in strategic decision-making or strategy work, including both short and long-term patterns and their implications (Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006). By strategic practices, we focus on the different socio-material methods, tools, and frameworks used as well as the cognitive, emotional, and political elements of strategic decision-making and strategy work (Kohtamäki et al., 2021; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In this broad view, following the example of others (Burgelman et al., 2018), we see the processes and practices as closely related and intertwined, and view language and communication playing a crucial role in them. This is important per se and it also enables the development of new theoretical and empirical insights to move strategy research forward more generally.

We argue that it is now time to take stock of the recent contributions to see how they have advanced strategy process and practice research. At the same time, it is important to note the limitations of this research—both theoretical and methodological—and to point to new research opportunities and questions. Thus, the purpose of this SMS collection is to focus on advances in language-based analyses of strategic processes and practices with an eye on new theoretical and methodological insights. After a review of the key pieces of work selected, we will offer a set of research opportunities and questions to form an agenda for future research.

2 | EXISTING RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN STRATEGIC PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

A number of perspectives can be taken to zoom in on the role of language and communication in strategy processes and practices. In their review, Balogun et al. (2014) identify post-structural,

critical discourse analysis, narrative, rhetoric, conversation analysis, and metaphor perspectives. In strategy-as-practice research, streams of research have emerged especially around the discursive (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Phillips, Sewell, & Jaynes, 2008) and narrative (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018) underpinnings of strategy work and the dynamics strategy conversations (Samra-Fredericks, 2004; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). The role of communication has also played a key role in in strategy process research; in particular, in framing (Kaplan, 2008, 2011) and development of the attention-based view (Ocasio, Laamanen, & Vaara, 2018). Rather than seeing language as an object in and of itself, studies have also used linked discourse with other social processes and sociomateriality (Dameron, Lê, & LeBaron, 2015; Wenzel & Koch, 2018). With the recent advances in mind, it is, however, time to take stock of what is known and what is absent from this rich body of work.

A review of the existing papers published in SMJ and other outlets reveals that that there is a plurality of theoretical ideas based on different research traditions and methods helping us to better understand the role of language and communication in strategy process and practice research. Importantly, we have recently seen a number of papers where language is not only used as a method of capturing other things but a key phenomenon in its own right. Thus, we focused on the papers where language use was an important part of the strategy process itself, rather those where some form of textual analysis was used as a methodological window into other strategic phenomena. The papers selected for this SMS collection are illuminating examples thereof:

- Paroutis and Heracleous (2013) contribute to our understanding of discursive underpinnings of strategy making with a focus on what they call “first-order” strategy discourse. They portray strategy directors as institutional entrepreneurs who play a fundamental role in changing the established ways of thinking and acting about strategy. These entrepreneurs socially construct their identities within the organization through specific use of language.
- Crilly (2017) adopts a mixed-method approach to show how, when describing the future, executives use analogies about time and space. These analogies, in term, shape how the individuals construe the future and influence attitudes to organizational actions with long-term benefits but short-term costs. In short, ego-moving frames (“we are approaching the future”) bring about a focus on the present whereby time-moving frames (“the future is approaching”) prompt executives to see the future as inevitable. The locus of managerial attention can meaningfully impact the formation and execution of strategic goals. When the future is framed as time-variant, perceptions of control over outcomes harness support for long-term strategies.
- Jalonen, Schildt, and Vaara (2018) explore the role of strategic concepts as a central micro-level tool in strategic sensemaking by analyzing a 13-year case study of a Finnish city organization, which went through a major strategic change. The article posits that the use of “self-responsibility” as a strategic concept played a central role in the strategic change process. It was also mobilized for the legitimization of such change by focusing agentic attention on specific issues and justifying organizational decisions. They also suggest that these strategic concepts are useful for a limited lifecycle, after which they tend to be replaced.
- Knight, Paroutis, and Heracleous (2018) use ethnographic data from two consulting engagements and find that strategists use visual mechanisms to create PowerPoint slides, which in turn prompt meaning-making through conversations they stimulate. As participants engage with the slides, they enact revised interpretations of the strategy. The paper explores how visual cues can help broker conflicting opinions of strategic decisions.
- Wenzel and Koch (2018) focus on the genre of keynote speeches and their power effects by looking at the relationship between spoken words and the strategist’s bodily movements. The

study argues that keynote speeches come into being as a *staged* genre of strategic communication. It also develops the methodological repertoire of strategy-as-practice research by expanding the analytical toolkit beyond discursive features of document-based linguistic analysis.

- Dalpiaz and Di Stefano (2018) examine how strategy-makers bring about transformative change through the construction of captivating narratives, or “narratives that imbue change-related events with a satisfying balance of novelty and familiarity” (p. 689). The study analyses the process of strategic change within Alessi between 1979 and 2010. During this time period, the company transformed itself from a conventional manufacturer to a leader in the market for design objects through the use of narrative practices that enabled strategy-makers to win audiences’ “minds and hearts.”
- Sinha, Jaskiewicz, Gibb, and Combs (2020) draw upon rhetorical history research and in-depth historical case study to describe how a firm managed its imprints. The authors use archival data covering 79 years of the firm's history, as well as interviews and observational data, to identify two processes through which historically imprinted strategic guideposts are linked to decision-making, namely rearranging processes and scope modifying processes. In the former, managers use narratives to rearrange the influence of guideposts. In the latter, manager change where guideposts apply.
- Sasaki, Kotlar, Ravasi, and Vaara (2020) analyze how strategy-makers try to reconcile change initiatives with organizational values and principle laid out long ago. The paper draws novel links between identity and strategy research and sheds light on the intergenerational transfer of values in family firms. Historical narratives are constructed with a combination of archival and contemporary materials. The authors used an empirical database of ancient mottos used by Japanese firms, identified whether these firms still used the mottos or whether they were replaced and, finally, conducted interviews and exchanged emails with informants from the firms to understand the reasons and implications for the revisions of these mottos.

3 | THEORETICAL INSIGHTS: TOWARD A MULTIFACETED AND DYNAMIC VIEW OF THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN STRATEGY WORK AND STRATEGIC CHANGE

What emerges from these papers is that language is not only a representation of cognition or thinking but an inherent part of sensemaking and action in strategy work and strategic change. Each one makes a unique contribution, but together they also help us to develop a multifaceted and dynamic view of the role of language in strategy. This includes: (a) analysis of the *microlevel conceptual basis of strategy discourse*, (b) studies of the *use of language in strategy work processes* in their socio-material and multimodal contexts, (c) analysis of *use of language* and especially narratives in *long-term processes of strategic change*, and (d) studies of the *rhetorical and discursive reconstruction of organizational strategies in their historical contexts*.

Practitioners have long recognized that strategy work revolves around language, and scholars have increasingly also in the strategy field realized that language not only represents but *enacts* reality. Thus, it is appropriate to start from the microlevel and note an increasing interest in the conceptual basis of strategy work. In the first paper in this selection, Paroutis and Heracleous (2013) focus on “first-order” strategy discourse, meaning that they zoom in on what strategy directors actually mean by strategy and how they use strategy language when pursuing strategic change. This ambitious paper paves the way to an understanding of how

first-order strategy discourse serves identity, functional, contextual, and metaphorical purposes. The second paper by Crilly (2017) is an example of a very different approach: analysis of analogies that managers use when making sense of the future (time and space). It specifically helps us to understand how the balance between the inevitability of the future (time-moving frame) and the ability to shape outcomes (control beliefs) is the key in future oriented strategic thinking and action. The third paper by Jalonen et al. (2018) then offers a comprehensive analysis of how specific strategic concepts are created and used in strategic sensemaking. Together, these papers representing different theoretical traditions offer a rich basis for future work on the discursive underpinnings of strategy work.

Not surprisingly, most research in this area has focused on the use of language in strategy making, and the papers by Paroutis and Heracleous (2013) and Jalonen et al. (2018) are also illustrations thereof. However, it is the fourth and fifth papers in this selection that provide us with novel insights as to how language is used in its social and material context. Knight et al. (2018) offer an insightful detailed analysis of how strategists make use of visual presentations in general and PowerPoint in particular in strategy work. The key point is that the visual representations are an inherent part of the various strategy conversations, and they can at times also help to achieve consensus. Wenzel and Koch (2018), in turn, focus on keynote speeches as an important genre of strategy work. Their analysis of Apple's keynote speeches emphasizes the role of embodiment and multimodality in strategic communication. Thus, these papers—alongside many others published in other outlets (Sillince, Jarzabkowski & Shaw, 2011; Sorsa & Vaara, 2020)—help us see the multiple dimensions and uses of language in strategy making.

While strategy making tends to be the key issue in this stream of research, it is also important to point out how specific strategy processes or episodes are linked with longer-term strategic change. While several papers in this selection place strategy making in a broader context, it is the paper by Dalpiaz and Di Stefano (2018) that offers us special insights as to how the different projects and processes are linked together. Their illuminating narrative analysis of Alessi's continuous strategic change process helps us to see how Alberto Alessi—as the key person—used a variety of narrative practices to time and again refresh Alessi's strategy narrative—as in a continuing series of episodes of strategic change.

With a more macro-orientation, the final papers of this selection offer insights about how history is rhetorically reconstructed when confronted with new situations of strategic change. Sinha et al. (2020) concentrate on how companies can rhetorically manage and manipulate its legacy. This happens in and through prioritizing and suspending (using narratives to rearrange guideposts' influence) and constraining and expanding (changing where guideposts apply). Finally, Sasaki et al. (2020) then offer an even longer-term analysis of how strategists make use of and struggle with historical legacies, captured in their case in ancient motto statements, when confronting new strategic change. They focus on three discursive strategists used to establish a sense of continuity: elaborating (transferring part of the content of the historical statement into a new one), recovering (forging a new statement based on historical references), and decoupling (allowing the coexistence of the historical statement and a contemporary one). Together, these papers highlight the historical embeddedness of strategic processes and practices (Vaara & Lamberg, 2016) and illuminate the ways in which language is both as an enabler and constraint when moving on with strategic change.

Thus, these papers have paved the way to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the role of language in strategic processes and practices. They have also helped to contextualize language use, so that it is not seen as a separate activity but linked with other social and material practices in their cultural, institutional, and historical contexts. What is then missing in the picture? We

think two things: (a) in-depth understanding of actual language use and (b) knowledge of the new communication technologies and media that play a key role in contemporary organizations.

We argue that the time is right to conduct more in-depth analyses of *actual language use*. This should not mean reinventing the wheel but instead drawing on advances in linguistics and related fields to be able to zoom in on the various conversational, rhetorical and discursive practices and processes. While there have been new contributions exemplifying detailed analyses of strategy conversations (Tavella, 2021; Whittle, Gilchrist, Mueller, & Lenney, 2021) in other outlets, such analyses have not been many and not yet found their way to the mainstream outlets such as SMS journals. The same can be said about rhetorical studies (Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Sorsa & Vaara, 2020) that have so far made little use of rhetorical theories and analyses developed in linguistics. Finally, although there is a strand of more critical discursive analysis in strategy research (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Mantere & Vaara, 2008), a lot more could be said for instance about how power is used, resistance expressed, or identities and subjectivities formed in and through strategy discourse. For instance, an-depth discursive analysis of how strategists develop their identity (Mantere & Whittington, 2021) can offer new insights as to how specific individuals gain authority and why particular strategies stand the test of time whereas others may lose their spark.

Furthermore, despite the new advances such as Wenzel and Koch (2018), there is a paucity of knowledge of the various *communication technologies and media that play a key role in contemporary organizations*. In short, it seems that research in this area has to date been limited by a conventional focus on what happens within organizations (e.g., in strategy processes or meetings) rather than placing strategic communication in its wider context. This is both a theoretical and a practical deficiency in terms of constraining our understanding of the arenas of strategic work and the means of communication used. Yet, we know that strategy making is increasingly taking place in new arenas—as exemplified by open strategy that is often based on widespread participation in physical and especially virtually arenas (Dobusch & Kapeller, 2017; Hautz, Seidl, & Whittington, 2017). Studying the new forms of strategy work in these spheres is one of the most important questions for strategy process and practice research. Moreover, the nature and role of strategy presentations has changed (Wenzel & Koch, 2018; Whittington, Yakis-Douglas, & Ahn, 2016), and it is important to deepen our understanding of the use of different technologies and media in how these presentations are made, disseminated, and received. Furthermore, the role of the mass or social media can be decisive in determining how strategic change may unfold, whether it is considered legitimate, and so on. This is a two-way street: on the one hand, companies—or managers and organizational members in and around them—use the media for particular aims. On the other, the media can be very influential in focusing attention on specific issues and phenomena—also leading to unanticipated outcomes. Digging deeper into the communication dynamics involved is a major challenge for future research.

4 | METHODOLOGICAL PLURALISM AND UNTAPPED POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

At this point, it is equally important to have a look at the methods used—and not used. We argue that a range of qualitative methodologies have been used to enrich our understanding, but that there is a great deal of untapped potential in using more specific methods. The proposed paper selection for the virtual special issue captures this breadth, using a rich combination of longitudinal case studies, interview-based analysis, ethnographic observation, archival, and multimodal analysis to derive theoretical insights. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, future

studies could dig deeper into the conversations, rhetorical processes, or discursive phenomena. For instance, conversation analysis could greatly enhance our understanding of the micro-dynamics of strategy meetings, workshops, awaydays, or, for example, corridor talk (Whittle et al., 2021). Rhetorical analysis could draw on New Rhetoric but could also be inspired by more detailed application of critical discourse analysis (Sorsa & Vaara, 2020).

We also want to highlight the novel methodological advances such as the use in video analysis. In particular, Wenzel and Koch (2018) focus on how discursive and bodily strategies are used in the delivery of keynote speeches at Apple. By conducting a systematic video analysis, the paper shows how discursive practices through bodily movements contribute to the construction of strategic concepts. More generally, a multimodal approach can capture patterns in strategic practices that would not be accessible solely through text (Clarke, Llewellyn, Cornelissen, & Viney, 2021; Gylfe, Franck, Lebaron, & Mantere, 2016). This is a promising pathway to also understand the role of the media in strategy making and strategic change.

However, it is the lack of use of quantitative analysis that is eye-opening in this field (see also Laamanen et al., 2015). In fact, Crilly's (2017) mix-methods paper is the only exception in our selection of papers. We argue that the explosion in the production of textual information by and about organizations, coupled with methodological developments in computational linguistics and machine learning, presents us with an overlooked opportunity (Simsek, Vaara, Paruchuri, Nadkarni, & Shaw, 2019). These advances in textual analysis could allow strategy researchers to better understand the microlevel dimensions of strategic practices and processes, as well as to link these microlevel dimensions to macro-organizational and market-level phenomena.

Machine learning and natural language processing techniques identify patterns and predict outcomes from data that extend more conventional methods (Choudhury, Wang, Carlson, & Khanna, 2019; Grimmer & Stewart, 2013), and advances in textual analysis could expand the scope of current qualitative approaches in, at least, two ways. First, supervised machine learning tools can extend the samples upon which current theory is built, expanding the spectrum of questions that can be rigorously addressed. Moreover, semisupervised machine learning tools can be fed higher-order topics, and related seed words, extracted from current theory. These tools are subsequently able to draw complex connections between these topics and their underlying linguistic features—on the basis of similarity, structural association or predictive power—that would be infeasible via traditional methods.

Second, unsupervised machine learning approaches can detect unnoticed regularities in these text databases that could further current theory. The last decade has seen unprecedented improvements in the accuracy and speed of statistical natural language processing techniques. We are now able to identify linguistic structures and semantic associations that are situation-specific and time-variant, allowing us to study meaning as an embedded social phenomenon, “[c]omputation can augment our fine perception of patterns in language and their links to the social world beneath” (Evans & Aceves, 2016). Studies in economics and finance, for example, have even developed institution-specific sentiment dictionaries that drastically improved the analysis of central banking statements or earnings phone calls.

Most promisingly, however, are the synergies between traditional qualitative approaches and these novel quantitative methods, which allow for the development of an epistemically objective science of a domain that is ontologically subjective. First, from a purely methodological perspective, supervised machine learning tools can learn from a smaller sample of human-coded text and extend textual classifications to databases that are orders-of-magnitude larger. Algorithms trained on human codes have already achieved improved fidelity compared to teams of naïve research assistants following formal protocols (Loughran & McDonald, 2011; Loughran & McDonald, 2016).

Second, these novel methodological approaches can help qualitative researchers to detect and predict qualities of the agents, audience, and underlying social phenomena from textual details imperceptible to human coders. These methods allow for the analysis of social games with greater temporal and structural complexity. In other words, they grant us the ability to interpret fine-grained changes in language use over time. This can, in turn, shed new light on structurally embedded social phenomena such as race, gender, and other institutionalized patterns of discrimination in strategy processes and practices. This form of analysis can breathe new light into historical and contemporary archives that have been made available today, which “opens the possibility of inferring more elaborate patterns *within* social games such as cycles, spatial arrays, complex hierarchies, and transitive orders” (Kemp & Tenenbaum, 2008). Finally, these methods allow researchers to reimagine previous research constraints on access to organizational data.

Although some of these methods and techniques may appear alien for strategy process or practice scholars used to qualitative methods, we see a great deal of value in a selective use of the new methods especially in dealing with the two limitations of current research identified above: in-depth understanding of actual language use and knowledge of the new communication technologies and media that play a key role in contemporary organizations.

5 | CONCLUSION

In several ways, scholars focusing on the role of language and communication in strategy process and practice research have greatly enriched our understanding of strategy work and strategic change. The papers selected for this SMS collection are a testament thereof. It is also important to note that many of the most recent advances have been published in SMJ. Nonetheless, these advances have been somewhat scattered, and we need to take stock of what is known and what is not to be able to place language and communication in the forefront of contemporary strategy research. To that effect, we have outlined an emerging framework that helps to see four closely linked, but still distinctive levels of analysis ranging from the more micro to the macro: (a) microlevel conceptual basis of strategy discourse, (b) use of language in strategy work processes in their socio-material and multimodal contexts, (c) use of language and especially narratives in long-term processes of strategic change, and (d) the rhetorical and discursive reconstruction of organizational strategies in their historical contexts. We hope that this framework will also inspire future research in this area full of research opportunities and questions.

It is equally important, however, to note the limitations of current research. Thus, we have argued that it is time to focus on the actual language use and to concentrate on the new forms and arenas of strategic communication beyond traditional organizational boundaries. This can be achieved in part by increasingly sophisticated studies of conversation, rhetorical, and discourse analysis. However, the largest untapped potential, it seems to us, may lie in the use of quantitative methods and big data. We believe that it would make perfect sense for scholars to follow the examples in adjacent fields to use the new methods—and thereby be able to contribute both theoretically and methodologically to the broader discussion about the role of language and communication in strategy research.

Although we have focused on strategy process and practice studies, we emphasize that these questions and issues have also broader relevance for strategy research. In essence, the theoretical and methodological points discussed above can—with due caution—be also applied to other areas of strategy research. To name just a few examples, it would be interesting and important to develop more sophisticated understanding of the role of language use and various

communication technologies in strategic persistence and change. Such analysis could focus on the mediatisation of communication, that is how managers and organizational members use the media but also how the media acts as an agenda setter. Studies could build on qualitative methods but also make use of new quantitative approaches to deal with key issues such as cultural change (Srivastava, Goldberg, Manian, & Potts, 2018). There are many opportunities to advance the ABV beyond “the pipes and prisms” view of communication with more in-depth analysis of discourse and rhetoric (Ocasio, Laamanen, & Vaara, 2018). Language is also linked with managerial cognition and emotions, and a closer analysis of discourse and texts can also reveal new aspects of strategic cognition, such as distributed cognition, and the key role of various kinds of emotions in strategy. Zooming in on discourse and communication can also complement research on the RBV and dynamic capabilities—streams of research that has so far prioritized the cognitivist view over social interaction and communication.

This SMS collection has focused on core questions and issues in strategic management—implying a focus on SMJ. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is a great deal that can be gained by increasingly advanced analyses of language and discourse in entrepreneurship. This is especially the case with topics such as pitches or narratives (Gafni, Maron, & Sade, 2019) and the use of the media (Howard, Kolb, & Sy, 2021) in and around new ventures. It would also be interesting to dig deeper into the use of rhetoric in the valuation of companies (Wang, Malik, & Wales, 2021). Furthermore, a closer focus on discourse could significantly contribute to our understanding of how global strategies emerge and develop (Treviño & Doh, 2020) or how the use of language is an inherent part of making sense of new cultures (Welch & Welch, 2019).

Thus, it is time to take language seriously in strategy research: not only treat it as a window into other aspects of strategic phenomena but as a central means through which strategies are shaped and made sense of. We hope that this SMS collection will inspire scholars in different areas of strategy research to make use of the new theoretical insights and to employ the largely untapped potential of increasingly sophisticated qualitative and quantitative methods.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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