Strategic Communication
The Role of Polyphony in Management Team Meetings

Helle Kryger Aggerholm and Christa Thomsen

Strategy has been defined as “situated, socially accomplished activity” (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007, pp. 7–8), who go on to state that “strategizing comprises those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity.” Strategy work is thus connected with particular types of practices, such as strategy meetings (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008) and strategy workshops (Prashantham, Bourque, Floyd, & Johnson, 2010; Seidl, MacIntosh & MacLean, 2006; Schwarz, 2009), which can be understood as focal points for the strategic activities of organizational members (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). One recommendation for analyzing strategic communication as a situated, socially accomplished activity is to focus on management teams and their communicative activities and practices in relation to strategy formulation (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008).

Researchers have conceptualized the management team as the inner circle of executives, who collectively formulate, articulate, and execute the strategic and tactical moves of an organization (Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk, & Roe, 2011; Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, & Bourgeois, 1997). The basic assumption of this field of research is that management teams influence their organizations through formulating and implementing strategy (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Love, Priem, & Lumpkin, 2002; Mintzberg, 1978). Communication can be seen as a lens to describe and explain organizations, the interest being in strategy formulation in terms of choice of a particular course of discursive or communicative action during management team meetings (Hendry, 2000; Habermas, 2006). Here the focus is on the process of organizing through interaction rather than on “communication” within an “organization” (Deetz, 2001, p. 5). Hence, in this view, the process of decision making is seen as a communication process itself, by which meaningful decisions are constructed (Deetz, 2001; Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007).

Previous research has suggested the amount and type of information team members gather, interpret, and synthesize during decision making influences the quality of strategic decisions (Dooley & Fryxell, 1999; Galbraith, 1973; Tushman & Nadler, 1978). Hambrick and Mason (1984) argue the values, cognitions, and personalities of team members are important sources of difference in the information they bring in and that this diversity has consequences for the content and quality of strategic decisions. Empirical studies have since then supported this proposition. These results show how the diversity in team members’ cognitive backgrounds, as well as interaction processes within team meetings in which task-related differences in information and opinions are openly discussed, is positively related to the quality of strategic decisions (Amason, 1996; Dooley & Fryxell, 1999; Olson, Parayitam, & Bao, 2007).
Despite this research, we know little about the role of discursive practices in the decision-making processes within management teams, and their subsequent influence on the formation of strategic communication in a broader organizational setting. In the last decade or so, we have seen an increase in academic interest in discursive-oriented studies within strategy research (e.g., Vaara, 2010; Vaara & Tienari, 2002; Vaara & Monin, 2010; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Overall, this interest is understood as part of a more general linguistic turn in social sciences. Discursive analyses of strategy have, for example, increased our comprehension of the role of language in strategy implementation, and opened up new perspectives on strategy: perspectives which we believe are useful for studying strategic communication (c.f. Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2010; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007, Pälli, Vaara, & Sorsa, 2009; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). In line with this, discursive analyses within the field of management have increased our comprehension of specific linguistic phenomena, such as polyphony, which we also believe are useful for studying strategic communication (e.g., Kornberger, Clegg & Carter, 2006).

Many researchers have studied corporate executives’ strategic use of frequent and continuous communication efforts to avoid contradictions, paradoxes, inconsistencies and tensions (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001; Seo & Creed, 2002), Research findings indicated that executives instead create underlying bases and contexts for organizational consensus, unity and commitment (Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Quinn, 1981; Rapert, Velliquette & Garretson, 2002). At the same time, there seems to be a scholarly consensus that this managerial use of strategic communication—understood as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission (Hallahan et al., 2007)—may inherently contain negatively associated elements of persuasion (Habermas, 2006) or at least some kind of malevolent intent (Foucault, 1984; Lyotard & Thébaud, 1985). This being said, it is far less accurately described by use of linguistic micro-analysis of how a multi-vocal setting, for example, a management team, on some occasions generates instances of polyphony (Kornberger et al., 2006). Consequently, the lack of knowledge within this area may have the potential to maintain an organizational unawareness with regard to elements of power and specific interests, which inevitably surface within communicated messages.

Based on the theoretically generated assumptions above, we intend in this chapter to contribute to a further development of how micro-level, discursive practices may assist in gaining a deeper understanding of strategic communication. On this basis, the focus of this chapter is three-fold. First, we shall study the role of communication in the process of strategy decision-making. Rather than studying communication practice as an organizational function, the focus in the chapter is to study how the presence of multiple viewpoints influences strategy making in upper management teams. Second, until now, strategic communication has been understood at a macro or meso level (c.f. Sandhu, 2009) not taking into consideration micro-level phenomena such as the proposal Kornberger et al. (2006) made on the interrelation of change and language. However, issues do not simply arise, but are defined by certain parties, confined within a certain linguistic frame of reference, and, most powerfully, identified discursively (Kornberger et al., 2006). Hence, the second focus of this chapter is the study of strategic communication at a micro-level in order to deepen our understanding of micro-level phenomena and bridge the micro and the macro. Third and finally, the chapter wants to challenge the inherently persuasive element of management’s strategic communication. Organizations (or individuals) who want to alter the behavior of others have four tools at their disposal: physical force, patronage, purchase, or persuasion (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1995). The latter involves navigating between and translating heterogeneous discourses (Kornberger et al., 2006) and the use of strategic communication to promote the acceptance of ideas. Thus, persuasion has until now laid at the very center of strategic communication (Hallahan et al., 2007). However, this chapter will show by use of the notion of polyphony “how the existence of multivocality in some occasions potentially represents managerial persuasion” (Belova, King & Sliwa, 2008, p. 496), but how in practice multivocality prevents the acceptance and mutual agreement of the organizational reality.
Applying observation notes and tape recordings of four management team meetings, the chapter empirically investigates communication in management teams through the prism of polyphony. By use of linguistic theory (Nølke et al., 2004) focusing on incidents of polyphony, for example in the form of negations as a linguistic micro-element, the purpose of the chapter is to address the following research question:

How does polyphony occur in the discursive practices by management team members, and what are the implications for the subsequent strategic communication at an organizational level?

By answering this question, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the possible relevance of studying strategic communication and management teams from a linguistically-based, polyphonic perspective.

The chapter consists of four sections. First, we present the literature on strategic communication, organizational polyphony and ambiguity, arguing that complexity and ambiguity are central to strategic communication. Polyphony is a useful framework for the study of multivocality in the sense that it can be used to reveal different types of hidden interaction and uncover the many voices and discourses that constitute organizations (Hazen, 1993). Managers must navigate between and translate these voices and discourses (Kornberger et al., 2006) in order to fulfill the mission of the organization. Second, the empirical research design and analytic process, that is, polyphony, is explained. Third, we present the empirical findings in two sections:

1. showing how polyphony within a management team shapes the strategy and
2. illustrating how the occurrence of polyphony in the strategy authoring phase has implications for the subsequent communication of the strategy to the employees.

Finally, we discuss the results and their contribution to strategic communication.

Theoretical Background

In this section, we review the literature on strategic communication, organizational polyphony and ambiguity, the purpose being to identify relevant information and place existing research in the context of its contribution to the understanding of organizing and strategizing.

Perspectives on Strategic Communication

Traditionally, strategic communication is defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3). This definition implies that people will be engaged in deliberate communication practice on behalf of the organization, such as shaping meaning, building trust, creating reputation, and managing symbolic relationships with internal and external stakeholders in order to support organizational growth and secure the freedom to operate (Zerfass, 2004; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). According to traditional management theory, strategic efforts are characterized and evaluated in terms of their economic contribution to the core drivers of success (Deetz, 2001). Hallahan et al. (2007) argue that the term strategic in relation to communication in its traditional context privileges a management discourse and emphasizes upper management’s goals for the organization as given and legitimate. Hence, strategic communication recognizes that purposeful influence is the fundamental goal of communications by organizations. In this instrumental view, communication is characterized as something managers do to accomplish something else (Conrad & Haynes, 2001, p. 53). However, this perspective also comprises a somewhat naïve recipient who supposes that a description stands for an object in a pure and unmitigated way that not only opens himself up to being deceived or misguided, but also forestalls any chance to trace the misinformation or to counter it (Arminen, 2006, p. 166). Thus, the term strategic in terms
of communication becomes unavoidably connected to the organizational context and the recipient’s interpretation.

In addition to the naïve recipient (Arminen, 2006), this intentionality within strategic communication also requires a purposeful actor, rational and deliberate decision making, and the implementation and evaluation of a strategic communication program (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 12). However, more and more scholars in strategic management seem to question any such ability of actors to act rationally in a contingent environment (Balogun, 2006; Holzhause, 2002; Jenkins, Ambrosini, & Collier, 2007; Pettigrew, Thomas, & Whittington, 2002; Powell, 2002; Pozzebon, 2004; Sandhu, 2009). Thus, Hallahan et al. (2007) deconstruct the term strategic to determine whether it necessarily implies manipulative or deviant communication practices or whether it allows for alternative, more critical readings that could provide a home to many different types of scholars. Contrary to the passive and naïve agent described above (Arminen 2006), Giddens (1984) argues that agents have the potential to deliberately and effectively choose and carry out actions in defiance of established rules, and thus Giddens positions the agent as an active person who can navigate the impact of social structure on her or his life. From Giddens’s perspective, the communication agent is able to reflexively resist domination and play an active role in shaping the organization through her or his (strategic) communication role in the organization (Hallahan et al., 2007).

Organizational Polyphony

Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the polyphonic notion and defined the term as the “multiplicity of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses …each with equal right and its own world” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 208). Polyphony in discourse (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Goffman, 1981; Klewitz & Couper-Kuhlen, 1999; Kotthoff, 1998) is manifested by the fact that speakers are forever switching into different voices of their own. Hence, the communication model moves away from the simplistic idea of strategic communication as message exchange between sender and receiver (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) to an understanding of communication as a complex, multi-vocal process.

According to Belova et al. (2008) polyphony can be used as a tool for analysing organizations as discursive spaces shaped by a multiplicity of dominant as well as peripheral voices “which together make up a contested and ever-changing arena of human action” (2008, p. 495). Thus, researchers advocate the application of a polyphonic lens in organization studies in order to understand strategic practice as a multi-centered, non-linear, and intersubjective discursive activity. For example a study on organizational learning by Oswick, Anthony, Keenoy, Mangham, and Grant (2000) suggests how the intertwining of various accounts of reality and complex interpretations constitutes organizational events as polyphonic rather than univocal sense-making. Hence, polyphony assists in viewing organizations as spaces with no universally agreed-upon central voice (Gergen & Whitney, 1996). Far from being an amalgamation of free-will and free-flowing points of view, organizations are constituted by complex webs of sense-making activities between groups and individuals whose understandings intersect, clash and interfere with each other (Hazen, 1993). In the polyphonic view of organizations, there is no overarching meaning of what is going on, but only partial, non-linear, elusive and constantly changing understandings that change depending on one’s relation to others. Hence, Carter, Clegg, Hogan & Kornberger (2003) claim the omnipresence of polyphony in organizations even if it is often silenced by dominant voices, stating, “in most organizations, there is a persistent plurality of different linguistic constructions that shape organizational reality” (2003, p. 295).

Kornberger et al. (2006) suggest the various discourses that embody and reinforce differences between disparate groups and members of an organization constitute organizational polyphony.
The role of managers in managing polyphony is to translate these heterogeneous discourses by conveying the message with its context and underlying meanings without having to unify or erase differences that enrich organizational life. This insight is relevant for our study of strategic communication in organizations in the sense that it helps us to delimit crucial communication processes; that is, in our case, the process of strategy translation, which takes place at an organization-wide meeting in which managers convey apparently unclear messages. These unclear messages are a result of underlying meanings in management talk at previous management team meetings.

**Ambiguity as a Communicative, Strategic Resource**

As stated in the previous section, researchers recognize the unavoidable existence of polyphony or multiple viewpoints in organizations (Eisenberg, 1984). The ambiguity which subsequently arises from these varying viewpoints is often seen as a key dimension in all complex organizations. Weick (2001) argues ambiguity is central to and existent in “all aspects of organizational activity” (p. 44), ranging from formal to informal activities and including all organizational members. In line with this, it has been largely acknowledged in strategy research that ambiguity is a central feature of strategy work (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010).

Lately there has been an increased awareness of the complexity of ambiguity in organizational communication in general and in strategy research specifically. The complexity entails both its potential for facilitating multiple understandings and its prospective challenge for organizational unity. As Jarzabkowski et al. (2010) put it, “On the one hand, ambiguity is a political resource that might help with generating action. However, ambiguity also enables partial and multiple meanings and interests to proliferate, which obscure action” (p. 221).

The notion of **strategic ambiguity** represents the assumption that ambiguity can be used as a resource within organizational communication. Eisenberg (1984) refers to the concept as “those instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals” (p. 230), thus including an element of strategic intentionality inherent in the traditional notion of strategic communication (Hallahan et al, 2007; Zerfass, 2004; Grunig et al., 2002). Eisenberg (1984) states “there are many situations in which ambiguous communication can be more helpful than clear communication, particularly during periods of rapid change and uncertainty” (p. 230), thus emphasizing that management can use ambiguity intentionally to facilitate multiple understandings of specific activities relevant for the organization.

Davenport and Leitch (2005) follow the understanding of ambiguity as a discursive strategic resource by showing how strategic ambiguity can be a means to delegate authority in organizational discourse. They focus on the role of strategic ambiguity in change processes and show that strategic ambiguity can open up the opportunity for the co-creation of meaning between multiple stakeholder groups. Hence, their study gives insight into how ambiguity can be used strategically in order to enable creative responses from various stakeholders.

Jarzabkowski et al. (2010) also focus on ambiguity as a resource by showing how different strategic actors can use strategic ambiguity as a discursive resource in order to balance individual interests and collective organizational goals. Based on four rhetorical positions, they develop a conceptual framework to explain how strategic ambiguity can be used as a resource for collective action while at the same time facilitating individual interests.

As a response to the prevalent focus on ambiguity as a strategic resource, Giroux (2006) introduces the term **pragmatic ambiguity**. Pragmatic ambiguity seeks to acknowledge that more than one course of action can be the result of a specific initiative. Here, ambiguity is seen as something that can be exploited intentionally, but the notion also acknowledges that not all ambiguity is the...
outcome of intentional acts. Instead, ambiguity can emerge by itself, in that for example “published texts . . . acquire a life of their own, sometimes far removed from the intention of their authors” (p. 1232). Thus, pragmatic ambiguity acknowledges that several interpretations are inevitable, while at the same time highlighting that numerous interpretations do not necessarily have to challenge collectivity and unity. According to Giroux, “the equivocality of concepts allows for different courses of action while maintaining a semblance of unity” (p. 1232).

The exploration of the strategic potential of ambiguity in strategizing work as such is of minor interest to this chapter. Instead we wish to investigate in detail the role of discourse and communication during a process of strategy formulation for the way different strategizing actors make use of language, and how this language use prevents unity and hence the formulation of monovocal, strategic (intentional) messages to the rest of the organization. By doing so, we hope to contribute new insight into strategic management communication, and, at a more general level, into strategizing as a micro-level discursive practice. The above review shows that several studies in management and organization research have discussed the concepts of polyphony and have shown their importance in understanding organizing and strategizing. However, there is still a lot of unexploited potential in how to apply these concepts, especially in empirical analysis. Despite the fact that the above studies have concerned themselves with the study of language and discourse, the micro-level analysis of discourse has remained an under-researched area. This chapter intends to remedy this by addressing strategizing activities as a micro-level discursive practice.

A Microanalytical Framework for Studying Multivocality

Within the linguistic literature, features of discourse that bring about other texts and other voices, for example reported speech, presupposition, negation, and irony, have been researched for decades and used in discourse analysis. Fairclough (1992), for example, talks about manifest intertextuality and (implicit) intertextuality and interdiscursivity, exemplifying these and other features of discourse related to polyphony. Previous research on dialogue (e.g., Linell, 1998, 2009) also is to a great extent concerned with analysing intertextuality and multivocality.

Nølke et al. (2004) has presented a linguistically-based polyphonic perspective and analytical framework. We will claim that this perspective constitutes a useful framework for studying communication in management teams, in the sense that it helps to identify and describe different types of hidden interaction. It thus uncovers implicit and unclear messages resulting from multivocality in management teams. Whether multivocality in management teams is intentional is not really central to the theory of polyphony. Polyphony is rather seen as a phenomenon that is inherent in all words or forms and in all organizations. Talk by individual managers seems particularly multi-voiced in the sense that they must take the voices and arguments of many different stakeholders into consideration, such as, for example, investors, board members, white-collar employees, and blue-collar employees. In the management discourse central to our study, we see that different voices are given the floor, if not explicitly (for example by citing specific stakeholders), then by some distinctive mark signaling polyphony such as negation particles, connectives, and adverbs. These voices may be refuted or accepted in various ways, and they are used in a complex set of controversy strategies and persuasion strategies, with clear elements of strategic ambiguity or “creative unclearness” (Fløttum, 2010, p. 992). According to the linguistically-based polyphonic perspective (Nølke et al., 2004):

elements from different levels in the linguistic description contribute to the polyphonic structure of an utterance: pronouns, connectives, sentence adverbs, negations, presuppositions, information structures, reported speeches and many more. When the polyphonic structure is identified at an abstract micro-linguistic level, it gives us instructions as regards possible interpretations of
the utterance related to its discursive context, which allows us to talk about different polyphonic configurations.

*Fløttum, 2010, p. 993*

In our analysis, we intend to identify polyphonic configurations and relate these to the organizational context, which, according to Fløttum (2010, p. 993), is the level of analysis where it is possible to link the abstract linguistically-attested voice to a real person or group of persons.

The polyphonic configuration can be described as a “unit” which consists of four entities (Fløttum, 2010, p. 993):

1. The locuteur-constructor who is responsible for the utterance
2. The point of view (POV), which is a semantic entity, related to a source
3. The discursive beings, which are semantic entities that constitute the sources
4. The enunciative relations, which relate the POV to the discursive beings. There are two main relations: the responsibility relation, which is by far the most important, and the non-responsibility relation of which there are various types, for example argumentative, counter-argumentative, reformulative, refutative.

Figure 11.1 below illustrates the creation of a polyphonic configuration in organizational communication and positions the framework in relation to the traditional, functionalistic way of understanding communication. In our case, each member of the management team we are studying represents such a configuration.

As illustrated in Figure 11.2, the many points of view constitute a challenge to intentional, strategic communication in the sense that they all contribute to the corporate story composed by Common Starting Points (CSP). CSPs are considered as central strategic values that function as the basis for undertaking all kinds of communication by an organization envisages (van Riel, 1995, p. 19). Thus, based on this theoretical viewpoint, the CSPs might seem to be inevitably multivocal and open to many interpretations.

In the following paragraphs, we will show how management talk, which is univocal in form, may have an implicit polyphonic structure in that the individual manager integrates the voices of others. The identification of different voices and their intra- or extra-organizational sources reveals relations between the individual manager and the voices integrated in the manager’s own

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**Figure 11.1  The Creation of Polyphonic Configurations**
message. Identifying such relations is essential to the interpretation of the discourse as a whole and to defining relevant contextual layers (Fløttum & Stenvoll, 2009), for example, organizational layers.

We will limit our presentation to a few examples of markers of polyphony: the negation *not* in its polemical use and the connective *but* in its contrastive use. This selection is justified by the frequent use of these specific two markers in our data.

**Research Design**

The analysis is based on data extracted from a single-case study of a medium-sized enterprise (Yin, 2009). The enterprise was founded in 1993 and has specialized since 1997 in the private-label production of pet foods. In 2008, the enterprise was divided into two separate Strategic Business Units (SBUs): that is, the enterprise participating in this study (private label) and a separate enterprise (branded business) with limited synergies and collaborations. The company is organized in a functional structure headed by a chief executive officer (CEO) supported by an upper management group. The corporation is owned by a large capital fund, which has clearly voiced its intention to divest the SBUs if and when the price is right.

In the 12-month period in which the authors were in regular contact with the company at various stages of data collection (from first contact to actually collecting data and conducting research), the financial crisis became the major issue both in the public media and in the formal and informal discussions of the management group itself. The degree to which the crisis affected the enterprise and hence how the global recession affected its market situation became a recurrent topic within the upper management group in the period of data collection. Gradually, it became evident that the CEO and what we considered to be the core of the strategic management group (chief operating officer (COO), sales and marketing director, the financial director and HR director) had different opinions about the situation of the company, and the researchers often observed that multiple viewpoints and many voices dominated the meetings. The CEO typically defended the market position, whereas the COO in particular and the sales and marketing director were more skeptical and critical toward this stance. The primary interest of the CEO was how to prepare the company for sale, whereas the primary interest of other people, the COO in particular, in many ways appeared to be more long-term.

Data collection was centered on the development of a new market strategy over a six-month period (July–December, 2009). The empirical evidence for the project was collected by the use of a multi-sited fieldwork methodology, focusing on techniques for doing fieldwork on the move (Czarniawska, 2008; Nadai & Maeder, 2005). Data was collected in the form of participant observations and video
recordings from six management team meetings. Moreover, we used participant observations and audio recordings of two organization-wide strategy information meetings to gain insight into the use of strategic communication following the management team meetings. Finally we conducted 12 semi-structured employee interviews to get an indication of the organizational members’ reception of the management team’s strategic communication.

For the purpose of this chapter, we have selected the most suitable examples to illustrate the role of polyphony in the discourse of the management team members.

**Exemplary Analysis: Polyphonic Discourse in Management Teams**

The six management team meetings around which our analysis centers could be characterized as basically consensus-oriented and very much dependent on the strategic context; that is, on strategic change and divestment. The meetings were held in July, August and September 2009 and lasted between two and three hours. The CEO, the COO, the sales and marketing director and the HR director participated in all six meetings, whereas the financial director was absent in two meetings. The head of production and the head of supply chain management participated in two of the meetings. The meetings were all held in the context of the financial crisis and at the same time in relation to the issue of divestment.

The topic of the management team meetings was the development and formulation of a strategic business plan where issues such as company history, price, distribution and so forth came up. In this setting, the CEO argued in favor of the success of the company and the management’s control over the situation, whereas the COO and the sales and marketing director argued in favor of tackling the challenges in terms of the difficult market situation facing the company.

The organizational situation of divestment and the context of the financial crisis constitute an important background for the interpretation of the polyphonic constructions analyzed below. However, in the following, the emphasis will be on linguistic features. We have selected exemplary passages containing instances of use of the negation *not* and the contrasting and concessive connective *but* as markers of polyphony. The examples with *not* illustrate the polyphony in the CEO’s discourse, whereas the examples with *but* illustrate the polyphony in the COO’s and the sales and marketing director’s discourse. Thus, the analysis reveals the different types of hidden interaction that management team members must navigate between and translate (Kornberger et al., 2006), in this case the hidden interaction in the CEO’s discourse versus the hidden interaction in the COO’s and sales and marketing director’s discourse.

**Authoring the Strategy in the Management Team**

The CEO’s positive perception of the company and control over the corporate situation is clearly present at the management team meetings. This perception is manifested in positive evaluative verbs and verb constructions such as *develop, continue to expand* and *aim at developing:*

1. **CEO:** *What we can do is to say that we believe that the market for our products will develop and continue to expand, and together with this description, we can say that next year, we aim at developing the market for our products for example in England, and here we need to make an effort.*

   Through the use of the pronoun *we*, the CEO transforms his statement into a polyphonic mix of what seems to be a mainstream top management voice mixed with the voices of the additional management team members, constructing thereby a discursive consensus. We argue
that the above exchange can be characterized as “creative unclearness” (Fløttum, 2009, p. 992).

For example, what is meant by expressions such as developing and an effort? And what does it mean that it is we who say that next year, we aim at developing the market and we who need to make an effort? Whose voices are actually included in this collective expression? Are all the voices of the management team members for example included?

The COO’s and the sales and marketing director’s perception of the company contrasts in many ways with the CEO’s perception. The perception of the COO is manifested in rather negative evaluative verbs and verb constructions such as “the figures do not lie,” “they are not positive” and “if prices go down further.”

2. COO: the figures do not lie . . . trends are important, and they are not positive . . . if prices go down further (interrupted by CEO: we don’t know) . . . but if you look over the last three years, prices have gone down . . . discount will be rising . . . much . . . supermarket chains have been hard hit and are now making discount labels.

The perception of the sales and marketing director (SMD) is manifested in the same type of negative evaluative verbs and verb constructions, for example “it only goes one way [downwards].”

3. SMD: it only goes one way on our home market [downwards] . . . we need a breakthrough elsewhere. In this country the market is saturated . . . the market development takes place on the other side of the pond [England].

The COO’s and the sales and marketing director’s views on the company are imposed in a more categorical way. Through the use of the pronouns you and we, they transform their statements into a polyphonic mix of what seems to be an expert’s or a market analyst’s voice mixed with the voices of the management team, constructing a discursive consensus which points in the opposite direction, the polyphony and the opposite direction being marked by not (the figures do not lie) and an implicit initial but.

In the following, we will show how polyphony can help us to reveal the hidden interaction in the discourse, on one hand the discourse of the CEO and on the other hand the discourse of the COO and the sales and marketing director. In particular, we will show how the individual manager integrates the voices of others in his talk. The identification of different voices and their sources reveals relations (such as refusal or acceptance) between the individual manager and the voices integrated in his talk. Identifying such relations helps us to define relevant contextual layers, such as social, political and organizational, thus bridging the micro and the macro.

Similar to the previous analysis, we will limit our presentation to a few examples of markers of implicit polyphony, the negation not (in the discourse of the CEO) and the contrastive connective but in its concessive use (in the discourse of the COO and the sales and marketing director). The main issue discussed is the pricing strategy, for example in relation to a coming expansion on the British market. The CEO defends the position that price is not important, whereas the COO and the sales and marketing director defend the opposite position: that is, that price matters and that the market has come under pressure manifested by falling prices over the last years. We will first present the polyphony in the discourse of the CEO:

4. CEO: Do we know whether it is important for our end users that a product costs eight or nine [currency] or isn’t it so that a product is purchased when it is well positioned? You don’t need to lower the price that much. We can document that the price is not an important factor.

The polyphony in this example is marked by not and realized as a rebuttal of the implicit point of view: that “price matters.” The argument is the following: Price is an important factor for
some commodities (private label), but not so important for others. However, by the polyphonic negation, the CEO refutes the insistence on the price as an important factor.

At this point, the sales and marketing director raises an alternative voice to the voice represented by the CEO:

5. SMD: . . . but we are regarded as a wholesaler, we don’t have the executive sales . . . we must crack the code in Germany, France and England . . . accessibility is our main concern . . . besides, I don’t totally agree . . . price and distribution are the most important factors.

Through the use of the polyphonic marker but in its contrastive and concessive capacity, the sales and marketing director takes responsibility for the point of view “but we are regarded as a wholesaler . . . we don’t have the executive sales.” The connective but gives us an instruction about the speaker making the concession that the point of view of the CEO is accepted, but not judged valid in the context and reasoning in question. The valid point of view here is the one presented by the sales and marketing director.

The voice of the sales and marketing director is more or less echoed by the COO:

6. COO: If we take a look at the last three years, then the price has been falling.

Through the use of the pronoun we, the COO transforms his statement into a polyphonic mix of what seems to be the voices of the individual management team members, constructing a discursive consensus.

However, the CEO repeats his point of view, presenting it in a somewhat more pedagogical form:

7. CEO: It is more fun if we can expand our market . . . it is not relevant to compete on price. What is important is that the product is there . . . it is not like milk . . . there is not a natural need. It is us who create the demand, so theoretically the need is insatiable . . . what we miss is point-of-sales material to give to people.

The polyphony in this example is marked by not (three times) and realized as a rebuttal of the implicit point of view: it is relevant to compete on price. By the polyphonic negation, the CEO once again refutes the insistence on the price as an important factor. In fact, what happened in this phase of the management team meeting was that the CEO closed the discussion about price and market situation, shifting the topic to communication strategy.

The COO and the sales and marketing director seemed to accept this topic shift. However, once again their view is different from the view the CEO presented, which the following statement by the sales and marketing director illustrates:

8. SMD: What is the purpose and the message . . . at the kick-off meeting [organization-wide information with all employees], for example . . . is it to convey the organization as picture perfect or is it to say ‘this is what we’re up against’ . . . we’ve got a business where we have some challenges . . .

Again, the polyphony is marked by an implicit point of view but followed by the two contrasting points of view, i.e. “the organization as picture perfect” and “this is what we’re up against.” It is this confrontational statement by the sales and marketing director that leads to the ambiguous or unclear statement by the CEO we saw in example 1:

9. CEO: What we can do is to say that we believe that the market for our products will develop and continue to expand, and together with this description, we can say that next year, we aim at developing the market for our products for example in England, and here we need to make an effort.

Figure 11.3 sums up the above analysis of the various points of view on the pricing strategy. It illustrates the multivocality previous to the creation of the CSPs and the Corporate Sustainable Story formulated by van Riel (1995).

This lack of clarity explains the ambiguity when communicating the strategy to the employees.
In the next section we will discuss this notion of ambiguity in light of the occurrences that followed the management team meetings. The purpose of this discussion is to illustrate our argument that polyphony manifests itself at the micro-level, first in the individual manager’s discourse and next in the management team’s discourse and finally in the communication at the organizational level, which consequently leads to uncertainty and confusion among employees, and ultimately lack of organizational persuasion.

Discussion

Following the six management team meetings, an annual meeting for the entire organization between upper management and the other organizational actors (middle management and employees) was arranged to convey or “translate” the strategic decisions made in relation to future sales and marketing efforts. The purpose of the meeting management formulated was to inform employees about the current situation, the development plans and the strategic goals, to establish and encourage a dialogue between management and employees, and to generate common commitment and corporate spirit across different functions. We consider this translation at the organization-wide meeting to be an exemplary instance of strategic communication in that the communicative focus is on conveying the strategic CSPs formally articulated and agreed upon in the written corporate strategy (the outcome of the line of management team meetings). At the organization-wide meeting the strategy team represented by the CEO, the COO, and the sales and marketing director presented the sales strategy and the market situation to the rest of the organization, including both front and back office employees and middle management, totaling 120 persons.

During his annual presentation on the state of the company, the CEO addressed the company’s market situation by reassuring his audience that the organization is unaffected by the global financial crisis:

What is special about [our company]—we can see it from the financial figures—it’s not the financial crisis and things like that which affect us. It’s something completely different. It’s whether or not it snows during the winter. How many pets are there? Is the pet market developing satisfactorily or not? Because once you’ve got a dog or cat, then you’ll feed them regardless of the financial crisis. In the same way as you feed your children or your grandparents. And if you feed your birds out in the garden, then you continue to do that. Because it doesn’t amount to that much money. It’s only a small item in the account, and in return you get excellent entertainment. But the unique thing about [our company] is that we are unaffected by the financial crisis . . . .

Subsequently, as can be seen from the following excerpt, the COO states the opposing point of view:
YES, [the company] has definitely been hit by the global financial crisis—but not as severely as other exporting corporations in [home country]. Many of the products we produce are sold in the UK, and a lot has happened to the British pound.

Knowing what discursively happened during the various management team meetings leading up to the organization-wide meeting, it is not difficult to explain how the communicative inconsistency seems to arise. The two opposing rhetorical positions created by the CEO and the COO, respectively, very much seem to follow the polyphonic patterns of the team meetings, and the common starting point seems to have vanished.

Following the organization-wide meeting, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 employees (a sample of 10% of the total organizational members) in order to create an understanding of the subsequent interpretations and sense-making processes occurring when the strategy text was recontextualized into an employee setting. Taking its point of departure in the CEO’s rhetorical position of stability and non-crisis, the analysis of the interviews indicated disparate, rhetorical positions such as acceptance, ambiguity and rejection expressed in employee discourse as a way to expose the multivocality present in this third recontextualized setting.

One voice illustrated by the utterance of a non-salaried member of staff working on the production line attached little importance to the strategic and financial situation of the company and supported the discursive position of the CEO, namely, that the organization was unaffected by the global economic crisis. Acceptance of the CEO’s translation of the strategic reality revealed a sense of security and trust in the management and the corporate strategic situation: “Oh well . . . the financial crisis is passing. It’s a sound company.” Another voice represented by a non-salaried member of staff working in the stockroom created a rhetorical position of ambiguity or confusion as he discursively reflected on the strategic initiatives the strategy team members presented:

“Well, I thought, ‘so our company division will be sold, and the other division will also be demerged,’ and my first thought was ‘wonder if we will have permanent employment when someone else takes over.’ That was my first thought. Afterwards, I talked to the warehouse manager, who has been with the company for 15 years, and he was calm and confident. So I thought, ‘oh well, it’s going to be all right.’

Hence, the employee expressed a position of uncertainty or ambiguity as to whether or not the external threats would result in a potential risk of being downsized. Finally, a third example of organizational voice constructed a negative discursive position in relation to the consequences of the global financial crisis, using a waver discourse between a cognitive understanding of the financial situation of the capital fund owners and an emotional insecurity. This position is exemplified in the statement of an office worker in the purchasing department:

In times like these, when you hear that venture capital funds are generally facing difficulties, and the capital base is no longer what it used to be, they can be forced into taking certain unexpected and unfavorable steps [such as a demerger]. This means that in reality we can suddenly be facing new owners, who might be a large player in the market. And who might want to gain considerable synergies by moving purchasing to for instance Germany, as their purchasing department is located there.

These rhetorical positions represent the multivocal interpretations or sense-making of the employees interviewed, illustrating once again the ambiguous understandings emerging on the basis of the situated context and priorities of each individual. Grounded in their own personal context, some employees might choose to ignore the threat of the financial crisis, preferring to express their interpretation of the strategy in terms of a positive rhetorical position instead. Others might be less averse to risk due to
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Personal characteristics such as a sense of empowerment, self-confidence, or family situation, so these individuals might be more willing to question the various rhetorical positions of management either by rejecting their translations or accepting the ambiguity created throughout the communication process. Consequently, the interpretation phase, in which the members of the organization perceived and interpreted the management’s strategic discourse, was characterized by discursively articulated positions of acceptance, ambiguity, disorientation and contradictions—reactions that ultimately might affect the strategy implementation change processes (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). As Kornberger et al. (2006, p. 13) noted, “issues do not simply arise, but are defined by certain parties, confined within a certain linguistic frame of reference, and, most powerfully, identified discursively.” Thus, these examples illustrate how the communicative behavior of organizational actors through the various phases of strategizing are dependent on and influenced by the specific situated context. This results in a multivocal interpretation of strategy, questioning, thus, the intentionality of strategic communication. Using the concept of polyphony it becomes possible to circumscribe strategic management communication as discursive practice not dominated by a single, persuasive discourse, but driven by different discourses.

Figure 11.4 illustrates how polyphony in the various phases of strategizing results in polyphonic CSPs.

**Conclusion**

Through these few examples, we have tried to show how a micro-level polyphonic approach can contribute to the analysis of strategic management communication. We have also tried to indicate
how macro-level organizational approaches might complement a micro-level approach, for example, in the implementation of the concept of CSPs, in order to reach a deeper understanding of the management discourse analyzed.

To conclude, one might ask what could possibly be the relevance of studying strategic communication from a micro-level polyphonic perspective?

From the organizational perspective of this case study, issues such as multiple voices, acceptance or refusal, points of view, and so forth, are interesting. They indicate points of convergence between micro-level and macro-level analyses. However, in order to give a macro-level interpretation of management discourse, micro-level polyphonic analysis needs assistance from broader managerial and organizational perspectives. These will help to determine to whom or what the linguistic sources correspond, for example, a stakeholder or a stakeholder group, or general opinion. This is a necessary step in order to understand “why a specific constellation of voices is put together, a specific content transmitted, or a specific relation between two given points of view presented” (Fløttum, 2010, p. 997). It is also necessary in order to understand the relationship between the utterances and the circumstances in which they appear, in our case change and divestment.

This analysis has integrated the broader perspective of strategic communication, in particular the concept of CSPs (van Riel, 1995). This has helped us to determine that the linguistic sources the CEO, the COO and the sales and marketing director used do not correspond to the same persons or group of persons, in our case different groups of customers. Whereas the COO and the sales and marketing director include for example the voice of discount chains in their discourse, these voices are not included in the discourse of the CEO. Taking into consideration the context of divestment, the personal (and maybe also financial) involvement of the CEO in the divestment and the difficulties of the COO and the sales and marketing director in getting access to, for example, discount chains, help us to understand what is happening in the discussion and, later on, when conveying the result of the discussion to the rest of the organization. Thus, the micro-level polyphonic analysis, conducted in this study combined with contextual information, reveals the multiple voices that are present in management team meetings and demonstrates how the multiple voices result in discrepancies in management team members’ organization-wide articulation of the strategic, external context of the corporation. This leads to uncertainty and confusion among employees, and thereby ultimately a lack of organizational persuasion.

Doing so, the analysis queries the automatic association of management communication with inherent elements of strategy and persuasion and contributes both theoretical and empirical knowledge about the role of polyphony for strategic communication. In line with Kornberger et al. (2006, p. 19), the study suggests there is no meta-language or grand narrative that represent the different polyphonic realities accurately. Given that organizations are constituted through different discourses—including the discourse legitimated by top management—no single discourse can be identified that can cope with the complexities emerging from polyphony. Specifically, our analysis has shown how the element of overall intent and/or persuasion in the practice of strategic communication may vanish due to discursive discrepancies in management teams caused by the occurrence of polyphony. Further empirical research is needed within this area to grasp the true nature of polyphony in strategic communication and to advise managers on how to manage this challenge in relation to organizing and strategizing.

References


Helle Kryger Aggerholm and Christa Thomsen


