The paradigmatic and syntagmatic structure of organizational routines: a deeper look into the ostensive

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Goals of this research

- Model the inner structure of ostensive routines

  - In order to gain insights regarding:

    - What does it contain?

    - How does it develop/change?

    - Its relation with the performative aspect

  - And possibly shed some light on key questions about routines:

    - How routines are created/emerge

    - Bridging the stability/change gap

    - Replication and change of routines

Theoretical inspiration

"The overall picture of an organization in routine operation can now be drawn. A flow of messages comes into the organization from the external environment and from clocks and calendars. The organization members receiving these messages interpret them as calling for performance... [T]he performance of routines by each organization member generates a stream of messages to others. These messages in turn are interpreted as calling for particular performances by their recipients, which generates other performances, messages, interpretations, and so on" (Nelson & Winter, 1982; p.103)

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- Actions as messages

- Actors as interpreters and responders

- Routine operation as dialogue between actors – a collective text

- Routines as meaning making systems

- Subtext - we can put task performance asside, if we create "comprehensible texts" as routine performance, acceptable task performance should be a welcomed "side effect"
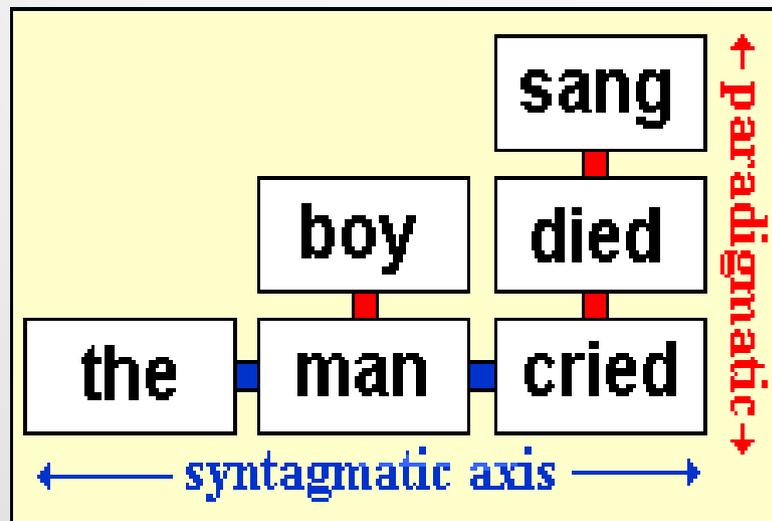
Theoretical positioning

- How does routine operation gets interpreted?

  - "The meaning of an event is conditional on its position in a sequence of inter-related events" (Bearman et. al. 2002)

  - But also, because we generate actions (texts), The meaning of an action is also contingent upon what "might have been", that is, from which pool of choices it has been selected (Eco, 1976)

- An interpretation mechanism (of anything, but especially of routines) must consists of relationships between actions, both actual and potential, and a mapping of those relationships to a contextual "meaning space"

- Where does this mechanism reside?

  - The performative aspects is the "text" (actions as messages)

  - The ostensive is the mechanism that facilitates its interpretation

- And how does it look like? Fortunately, no need to invent anything new, just borrow.

A crash course in semiotics (I)

- Semiotics is a field of the study of complex sign systems that convey meaning.
  - Emerged as a field in linguistics about 100 years ago (Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Pierce)
  - Expanded to include general sign systems (from traffic lights to music and art)
  - Based on structural/relational analysis of signs and the meaning they convey/generate
- The sign is its basic element. Signs are built from:
  - Signifier - an abstract form of the sign (can also be an object)
  - Signified – an interpretation (meaning) in a specific context
  - Texts are combination (typically sequential, but not necessarily) of signs.
- Meaning stems from relations between signs
  - Relational invariance: different interpretations are possible, as long as basic relations among the signified elements are kept intact
  - Markedness: the "exceptional" side of any relation is kept as well, and contains "more information" about the intended meaning.
  - Bapuji et. al. (2012) as an illustration of markedness.

A crash course in semiotics (II)

- Two main categories of relations

  - Paradigmatic relations: which signs can substitute each other

  - Syntagmatic relations: which signs can follow each other (configural dependencies)

Semiotics applied to routines

- Repeated actions (the performative!) become signs (or vocabulary)
  - Repetition is crucial to create the coupling of the signifeir/signified
- Further repetitions generates further relations among signs:
  - Paradigmatic relations: which actions can substitute each other
    - Ensures appropriateness of actions
    - Source of endogenous variations
    - Generative in nature
  - Syntagmatic relations: configural dependencies
    - In general – ensures stability
    - Variations are likely caused by exogenous factors
    - Example: Pentland et. al. (2011) invoice routine

Properties & implications (I)

- Semiotics systems are generative in nature

- Stability/variability:
  - Enables/expains both stability, endogenous and exogenous variability

- Multiple ostensives?
  - Yes, but as long as they are "mutually coherent" (Birnholtz et. al., 2007), which means, that it is unlikely that interacting members will face "interpretational conflict"
  - In the absence of such conflicts: shared understanding, "organizational character" - a sense of unified ostensive.
  - Ecologies of routines: share the same ostensive?

Properties & Implications (II)

- Creation of routines:
  - The performative as fueling the process of generating signs and sign-relationships
  - Forward and backward learning as "negotiation of meaning"
- Replication and change of routines
  - It is not enough to copy the sequence of actions
  - We must, somehow, learn the relationships, especially of those actions that are not usually performed
  - But sometimes, a thin subset of those relationship is enough to recreate a close enough replication
  - A change in the relationship structure changes the routine.
- Observing the ostensive
  - Asking people what actions can substitute each other, etc.

Thank you!

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS?

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