

APPLYING SOCIO-SEMIOTICS TO ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION A New Approach

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In a landmark book that continues to influence researchers in organizational communication, Linda Putnam (1983) presented the interpretive approach as an emergent paradigm that offered alternative insights and methods in a field that was then dominated by functionalism. More than 15 years later, this new perspective is well established and seems to have even surpassed functionalism in terms of official recognition. All the scholars who published in this seminal book are today among the leading figures of the field and have contributed to building the reputation of the interpretive approach by publishing a series of important articles and monographs.¹

This article is not intended to take the first steps toward a new paradigmatic shift. It argues instead that a socio-semiotic approach to organizational communication opens up a middle course leading to a reconciliation of the functionalist and interpretive movements. First presented by Taylor in his 1993 book, *Rethinking the Theory of Organizational Communication: How to Read an Organization*, the socio-semiotic perspective bridges the gap that traditionally separates functionalism and interpretivism by concentrating on the organizing properties of communication.² What is at stake is the development of a theoretical model that reconciles the oppositions between functionalism and interpretivism, as established by Putnam. The socio-semiotic model allows us to analyze organizations (a) as symbolic processes *and* social facts (a first opposition proposed by Putnam, 1983, pp. 34-36), and (b) as “*cooperative systems in pursuit of common interests and goals*” (p. 37), a unitary view of

organizing defended by functionalists, and as “*an array of factionalized groups with diverse purposes and goals*” (p. 38), a pluralistic view defended by interpretivists. The questions thus become, “How can we bridge the functionalist/interpretivist gap?” and, secondarily, “How do we reconcile actions and structures?”

A socio-semiotic model of organizational communication proposes an original answer to that old problem by starting from three premises. First, an organizational structure always has both a temporal and a spatial nature. The best way to conceive of the social structure’s mode of being is to understand it as a narrative, that is, a syntagmatic structure that is created or sustained through time and space. Second, an organizational structure can never be used as an a priori device that would enable us to explain a specific mode of behavior. In other words, the social form that we call “structure” can only be identified retrospectively as the result of a series of physical and discursive actions that have structuring or organizing properties. Third, if we want to explain these structuring properties, it is imperative to introduce not only human agents but also nonhuman agents into our explanation. As we will see, organizations and, more generally, societies endure mainly because of specific actions performed by texts, objects, and machines. In this article, I illustrate these three premises and show how they enable us to reconceptualize the opposition established by Putnam between functionalism and interpretivism.

THE NARRATIVE DIMENSION OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Every narrative can be understood as a series of schemas embedded within each other (Greimas, 1983, 1987; Greimas & Courtés, 1982). To illustrate this point, let me choose the movie *Star Wars* (1977). Despite the complexity of its narrative structure, this film can be analyzed according to some relatively simple schemas: The hero (Luke Skywalker) is asked by the Rebel Alliance (represented by Princess Leia) to perform a specific mission (saving the Alliance by destroying the Death Star). After some hesitation, Luke accepts

the mission. To carry it out, he enlists the support of many allies (e.g., Han Solo, Ben Kenobi, C-3PO, R2D2, and Princess Leia herself) who help him overcome several obstacles (Darth Vader and his henchmen, the stormtroopers, among others). After accomplishing his mission, he is rewarded by the Alliance. Although this explicative schema does not exhaust the complexity of the story, it gives us its basic structure, that is, it enables us to understand how the narrative makes sense globally. Five phases can be identified in this principal narrative schema: (a) a Manipulation phase, in which the Rebel Alliance gives Luke the mission to carry out; (b) a Commitment phase, in which Luke accepts the mission; (c) a Competence phase, in which many helpers are associated with Luke to support him in his mission; (d) a Performance phase, in which Luke accomplishes his final mission; and (e) a Sanction phase, in which Luke is rewarded for his successful performance (for more details, see Groleau & Cooren, 1998). Assuming the generality of this schema, it follows that every narrative is structured as an exchange: Because X (Luke) undertakes a mission for Y (the Rebel Alliance), X must be compensated by Y when the mission is accomplished. The structure of every narrative is thus syntagmatic (i.e., both temporal and spatial).

Furthermore, it is important to note that this schema (i.e., a structure of exchange) is found at every level of the narrative. To take one example, the first mobilization of Han Solo in Luke's mission can be analyzed as follows: (a') manipulation phase: Luke tries to convince Han Solo to transport him to a planet; (b') commitment phase: Han Solo agrees (in exchange for compensation); (c') competence phase: Han Solo uses two helpers (his spaceship, the Millennium Falcon, and his copilot, Chewbacca) to accomplish his mission; (d') performance phase: Han Solo lands with his crew on the planet; (e') sanction phase: Han Solo is compensated financially by Luke. What appeared to be a competence phase (c) in the principal narrative schema that we first identified can be itself analyzed as a narrative subschema, from (a') to (e'). The structuration of a narrative thus lies in a series of exchanges that are embedded within each other in a hierarchical form. According to this analysis,

a narrative makes sense by creating a series of articulations between different narrative schemas.

Note that the basic tension that traditional sociology establishes between actions and structures seems to be resolved in this explicative schema. The different phases of the narrative schema of the *Star Wars* story are realized by specific actions that progressively structure it as a story. The manipulation phase can be easily compared to what are called "directives" in speech act theory (e.g., asking, requesting, begging). The commitment phase corresponds to what speech act theory calls "commissives" (e.g., accepting, committing oneself, agreeing). The competence phase can be associated with what Cooren and Taylor (1997) call "accreditatives" (e.g., permitting, enabling) and "informatives" (e.g., informing, teaching). Finally, the sanction phase amounts to performing what we traditionally call "expressives" (e.g., congratulating, thanking). All these communicative acts structure the narrative schemas by anticipating and following the central action that we call the performance phase.

If we now compare this structuration with what happens in a social organization, an isomorphism seems to appear. First, an organization always has a specific object or objective, whatever it may be: making a profit (business organizations), helping the needy (charities), saving the environment (environmental groups), and so forth. What we call the *raison d'être* of an organization has the same status as the mission that Luke has to accomplish in our example. Second, many different allies are usually mobilized to fulfill this objective, from the employees to the CEO through the middle managers. What we call division of labor and coordination can be easily compared with the competence phase identified previously: Through a series of coordinated submissions performed at every level of the organization, the main objective is progressively accomplished.³ Third, an organization is a structure of exchange, that is, every form of submission that constitutes the organizational hierarchy has to be compensated in one way or another. Salaries are, of course, the usual form of compensation, but other traditional forms exist such as recognition, promotion, and congratulation.

The first premise seems globally confirmed: Organizational structures have narrative dimensions, that is, what we call an organizational system can be easily compared to a structure of submissions and exchanges that we traditionally find in narratives. Let's now explore the second premise.

THE RETROSPECTIVE DIMENSION OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

If organizational structures can be compared with narrative structures, it is important to note that, unlike a book or a novel, organizational life is never completely written in advance. The structure of the fourth episode of *Star Wars* will normally never change: It was shot and inscribed "once and for all" on a film at the end of the 1970s.⁴ A social organization should instead be compared to fantasy game books in which readers become the heroes of the story. Half story, half game, these books (or video games) invite the reader to choose a character and overcome a series of challenges to accomplish a mission. Although the book is written in advance, the sequence of events is unpredictable, because it depends on the choice the reader makes at every page of the book. In this case, as in any social organization, the actual structure of the narrative is the retrospective result of the sequence the reader decides to enact.

To illustrate this point, let me take an organizational example that I am currently studying: a drug rehabilitation program for ex-convicts. Here is a grassroots organization with a specific objective: rehabilitating ex-convicts who suffer from drug problems. This mission is the *raison d'être* of the organization, because it is what ultimately unifies all the people who work in the program (e.g., managers, employees, doctors, social workers, nurses, psychologists). Like a game of strategy, this organization is, in a sense, written in advance: Many procedures exist for whoever is working or even treated in this program and an organization chart attributes a specific position to each employee and manager in what appears to be a structure of submission. However, as in a game of strategy, the sequence of the events can *never* be *completely* anticipated,

because it also depends on the decision that every actor decides to make at every level of the program. That is why a structure can never be used as a form of explanation for a specific behavior: The actual submissions that are progressively completed to rehabilitate a client are always subjected to potential obstacles (e.g., a client who refuses to “play the game,” a treatment that does not work, a lack of means due to financial problems). To all these obstacles can also be added a lack of coordination between the different submissions of the program, as well as some potential problems of commitment of the employees, sometimes due to a lack of compensation.

Each phase of the narrative/organizational scheme (manipulation, commitment, competence, performance, sanction) is thus potentially problematic. In other words, although each communicative act (directive, commissive, accreditative, expressive) has structuring or organizing properties, the organizational structure is itself at the mercy of accidents and circumstances. Because the structure is both spatial and temporal, its actualization depends on the articulation of the various forms of submissions from which the organization emerges or is reproduced. As the term reproduction implies, an organization must be produced to be reproduced. As in a strategy or simulation game, a script is certainly written in advance (through the procedures and respective responsibilities of each organizational member), but the final structure of the “organizational narrative” is always the retrospective result of a coordinated production of specific schemas. Let us now turn to the third premise.

THE MOBILIZATION OF NONHUMAN AGENTS IN ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESSES

Although we have just seen that structures are always the a posteriori result of structuring and organizing processes, it nevertheless remains that organizations and, more generally, societies have a remarkable capacity to endure. If structures cannot be used to explain how an organization can sometimes be so rigid and

predictable, we then have to find another model to account for that phenomenon. This is exactly what the socio-semiotic approach proposes to do by mobilizing nonhuman agents in its explanation, following Callon (1986), Greimas (1983, 1987), and Latour (1987, 1993, 1996). One usual way to succeed in mobilizing human agents in organizational schemas is to introduce nonhumans in the process: the contracts and rules that bind employees to do specific tasks, the procedures and architectural elements that constrain them to follow specific organizational pathways, the computers and instruments that participate in their daily actions by enabling and constraining them. The structure of submission, imperative in any organizational schema, is thus reinforced by these special agents that are usually neglected in our analyses.

Whereas traditional sociology explores the gap that appears to separate human actions from social structures, the socio-semiotic approach proposes to bridge it by introducing agents to whom we usually deny any form of action. But what would an organization be without these rules, contracts, instruments, machines—what Taylor (1993) calls “texts”—that can intervene at any time in the organizing processes by constraining and enabling us? As Latour (1987, 1993, 1996) reminds us, the micro-macro conundrum will never be solved if we don’t introduce the actions of objects into our explanation. To take an example, simple rules or contracts can become important actors when any form of dissociation occurs vis-à-vis the anticipated organizational schemas. If a client of the drug rehabilitation program refuses to “play the game,” a rule or the contract he signed can be called upon to enjoin him to cooperate. Nothing prevents us from saying that it is the rule or the contract that is forcing him to play the game (and this form of explanation is, of course, applicable to other forms of techniques, from seducing to incarcerating through monitoring). Whereas functionalists see actions as the actualization of a structure, the socio-semiotic approach shows that everything reduces to the issue of agency. Once we recognize the actions performed by nonhumans in the organizational schemas, we realize that each agent (human or nonhuman) is active as well as acted. To take the example of a contract again, this text is produced through what we usually call a speech act: It is thus *acted*.

By referring to this contract to solve a bone of contention, it becomes in turn active. What we call an organizational structure is thus the tentative and retrospective result of this general form of agency. By what Derrida (1990) calls their "restance," that is, their "staying capacity," the texts (in the broad sense defined by Taylor, 1993) guarantee (as long as they are not destroyed, replaced, or even subverted) the longevity of institutions or organizations by enforcing and participating in the organizational schemas.

CONCLUSION

Can organizations be considered both symbolic processes *and* social facts? The socio-semiotic model seems to answer this question positively. As we saw earlier, a social organization has a syntagmatic form that involves a series of physical and discursive actions whose organizing properties have been highlighted. In Putnam's (1983) word, it is a symbolic process.⁵ However, nothing prevents us from also considering them to be social facts. As the Latin root of the term *facts* reminds us (*fact* comes from *facere* or "to make, to do"), a fact is something that is made or done. Discursive actions that make up organizational reality can thus also be considered facts, because they consist, as Austin (1975) puts it, of "doing things." Speech acts (that I prefer to call "discursive acts") create, as Searle (1969, 1995) reminds us, institutional facts that are as objective and real as brute facts. The discursive dimension of organizational reality is thus also a factual reality.

If we now turn to the second criterion used by Putnam, we also realize that the socio-semiotic approach to organizational communication enables us to reconcile the unitary view of organizing defended by functionalists with the pluralistic view defended by interpretivists. If an organization can be really compared with a narrative, it is important to note that there are as many narratives as there are actors. As in every movie or novel, we perceive a narrative unity because the story consists of following some specific agent—the hero—vis-à-vis whom the other agents become helpers or opponents. The principal narrative schema amounts to following

the main character who has to complete a mission. That's how we globally make sense of a narrative and that's how we can make sense of an organization: The hero becomes the leader or manager and the mission becomes the organizational objective. But nothing prevents us from following other agents or coalitions of agents. As it is implied in every narrative model, a story is made not only of alliances and associations but also of struggles, betrayals, rebellions, and dissociations. As we saw earlier, an organization, like a narrative, is a structure of exchange where every submission is always conditional to a form of compensation, a compensation that consists precisely of taking account of other missions and other agendas. Focusing on the employees' perspective, like the interpretivists and critical interpretivists propose we do, thus consists of taking those agendas into account by telling the organizational story from other perspectives. Far from being irreconcilable, functionalist and interpretive perspectives are thus complementary, because they consist of telling at least two different organizational stories.

NOTES

1. To name a few: Cheney (1991, 1997); Cheney and Carroll (1997); Cheney and Tompkins (1989); Conrad (1993); Conrad and Poole (1997); Deetz (1992); McPhee and Tompkins (1985); Poole, Seibold, and McPhee (1985); Smircich (1983a, 1983b); Tompkins (1993); and Weick (1995).

2. For more details on this new approach, see Cooren and Taylor (1997, 1998, in press); Groleau and Cooren (1998); Robichaud (1998); Taylor (1995); Taylor and Cooren (1997); Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, and Robichaud (1996); and Taylor and Van Every (in press).

3. The concept of submission refers not only to the idea of a mission that is hierarchically subordinated to another mission but also to the act of submitting. As we will see, every organization is a structure of submission.

4. Note that the *Star Wars* trilogy has actually been modified or updated recently, although the basic structure of the movie has not been radically changed. Nothing prevents a narrative structure from being modified retrospectively.

5. However, reducing organizational processes to symbolic or discursive processes amounts to neglecting physical processes that also participate in the organization schemas. Although their action can be interpreted symbolically, the participation of machines, instruments, and architectural elements in the social and organizational processes cannot be reduced to symbolic processes. For example, the methadone treatment is an important part of the drug rehabilitation program.

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