PRESENTER SYMPOSIUM

Networks of Meaning –

Recent Research on Structure, Content and Meaning Networks

Organizer:

Christine Moser, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Discussant:

Stephen P. Borgatti, University of Kentucky

Presenters (*) and co-authors:

Networks of Meaning and Communication Flows
Peter Groenewegen*, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Table for Two: Assessing the Effects of Authenticity Narratives on Critical Evaluations of Restaurants
Vitaliano Barberio, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business
Alessandro Lomi, University of Italian Switzerland
Francesca Pallotti*, University of Greenwich

Ideas with Impact: How Centrality in a Content Network Shapes Idea Diffusion
Dirk Deichmann*, Rotterdam School of Management
Julie M. Birkholz, Ghent University
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Adina Nerghes, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences
Peter Groenewegen, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
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Bridging Cultural Holes: Organizational Vocabularies and Communication Networks Across Organizational Subunits
Stefano Tasselli*, Rotterdam School of Management
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Division sponsors: Organization and Management Theory
Research Methods
Organizational Communication & Information Systems
OVERVIEW OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Mirroring the rapid developments in data analysis, modelling and simulations, the field of network research has expanded in recent years. We are witnessing an increase of publications on the topic of social networks (Borgatti, Brass, & Halgin, 2014). In tandem with the growing interest in social network research, network scholars push the boundaries of the field and call for more attention to “how structure, content and meaning are dynamically intertwined” (Ferguson, Groenewegen, Moser, Borgatti, & Mohr, 2017: 1). Although the recent interest in social and meaning networks suggests a new phenomenon, indeed the core ideas have been around for some time. For example, according to Simmel, individuals are embedded in a web of relations, where the form of interaction matters as well as the type of interactants (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017). Simmel’s theories suggest a multiplexity of relationships, where social relations, meaning and culture are inextricably intertwined. Also, White developed his take on relational sociology in a series of influential books (for the most recent one, see White, 2012). At the core of his thinking is the prevalence of social structures. Indeed, according to White, “meaning comes into being only as accommodation to patterns of social action that have been able to reproduce themselves” (2012: 140).

The interest in the intersection of social and meaning networks, we argue, has been renewed for two main reasons. First, recently there is a general increase in interest for social network research (Borgatti et al., 2014). Social network research has established a firm footing in organizational journals, as evidenced by a large number of recent publications (e.g., Battilana & Casciaro, 2012; Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, & Labianca, 2009; Burt et al., 2016; Caimo & Lomi, 2015; Cattani & Feriani, 2008; Groenewegen & Moser, 2014; Kane, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014; Tasselli, Kilduff, & Menges, 2015; Tatarynowicz, Sytch, & Gulati, 2015; Tortoriello, McEvily, & Krackhardt, 2015; Venkataramani, Labianca, & Grosser, 2013). Driven by such profound research
interest, the field moves forward and matures (cf. Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Second, recent and rapid developments in data analysis, modelling and simulations have further stimulated network researchers to expand their empirical and conceptual horizon. As a consequence of readily available (large) datasets, investigations of content have become more feasible. Organizational scholars increasingly draw on network analytical techniques to investigate social and meaning networks simultaneously.

This emerging research stream has already conquered a niche in organizational journals. For example, Shipilov and colleagues (2014: 449) argue that “a focal entity (a person, a team, or an organization) derives its meaning and its potential for action from relations of multiple kinds with other entities”. This perspective transcends simplistic explanations of organizational behavior, and calls for an approach where the simultaneous and complex interaction between relations in different (types of) networks receives more attention. Similarly, a recent volume of Research in the Sociology of Organizations brought together organizational scholars and sociologists, in an effort to integrate social network and meaning network reasoning (Ferguson et al., 2017). With this presenter symposium, we aim to achieve two main goals:

(1) Continue the conversation on how social and meaning networks are intertwined, and how this matters for organizations;

(2) Open up the discussion for a broader audience, thus enabling a dialogue between organizational scholars from different domains.

We believe that the emerging research stream of “networks of meaning” has great potential for meaningful contributions to organizational theory. This perspective provides scholars with the conceptual space to find comprehensive explanations for organizational phenomena; explanations that recognize and take into account the complexity of social relations and the meaning embedded in these relations. In addition, the networks of meaning
perspective offers points of contacts with other disciplines; among others communication
science, sociology, and computer science. This perspective has the potential to provide
meaningful answers to important contemporary questions, relevant to theory and society. As
such, networks of meaning can be used as a tool to render a “thoughtful and accurate
explanation” (Davis, 2014: 314) for important, real-life questions.

Presentations

The first presentation by Peter Groenewegen will address recent developments that
bring together theoretical frameworks from network theory and communication theory in one
multilevel framework. Communicative events (which can be many and different elements
ranging from interpersonal interactions, press releases, briefings, press releases and news
releases) are an essential part of both frameworks. By integrating these different views, the
framework opens up new options to analyze differentiation (of relations and meaning
between the different flows and domains) and issues of synchronization.

Second, Francesca Pallotti will present ongoing work by herself and co-authors
Vitaliano Barberio and Alessandro Lomi. Their research question is how specific meaning
structures emerging from narratives of authenticity shape the critical evaluation of restaurants –
organizations for which concepts of authenticity has been shown to be particularly salient.
Authenticity represents both a meaningful dimension of organizational identities, as well as a
positive value for the relevant audiences. Their empirical evidence is based on semantic
network analysis and sentiment analysis techniques to understand how the meaning authenticity
narratives associated with specific ingredients varies across national cuisines.

Third, the study of Deichmann, Birkholz, Moser, Nerghes, Groenewegen and Wang is
situated in the context of computer science. Despite a growing body of research on idea
diffusion, there is a lack of knowledge on why some ideas successfully diffuse and stand out
from the crowd while others do not surface or remain unnoticed. The paper addresses this question by looking into the characteristics of an idea, specifically its position in a content network. The study focuses on academic conference publications and the co-authorship data of a community of computer science researchers from 2006 to 2012 and finds confirmation for the hypotheses.

Finally, Stefano Tasselli will present a study on organizational vocabularies, co-authored by Paola Zappa and Alessandro Lomi. In their study, they ask how the overlap in organizational vocabularies affects communication and information sharing relations across formal organizational boundaries? The study brings together to hardly connected, albeit important streams of literature; institutional logics and structural logics. The authors show that formal boundaries between organizational units contribute to the development of within-units social communication patterns and within-unit homogeneity of vocabularies and meanings. Yet, sharing common vocabularies allows organizational members to span those boundaries and communicate meaningful information across different organizational units.

**INTEREST TO SPONSORING DIVISIONS**

*Organization and Management Theory (OMT)*

The OMT division encourages “new theory development” and “celebrates theoretical activity, methodological pluralism and linkages between theory and practice”. The two main goals of our symposium, which are to (1) continue the conversation on how social and meaning networks are intertwined, and how this matters for organizations; and (2) open up the discussion for a broader audience, thus enabling a dialogue between organizational scholars from different domains; perfectly fits the core ideas of the OMT division. With our presentations and the plenary discussion, we envision to take some steps toward reaching the former goal. This goal is, in short, to develop new theory on how social and meaning
networks are interlinked and why this is important. The latter goal fits OMT’s aim to encourage methodological pluralism. In bringing together different methods in terms of data collection, analysis and presentation, we familiarize the OMT audience with recent methodological developments in the analysis of social and meaning networks.

**Research Methods (RM)**

The RM division “aims to support the process of doing organizational research (qualitative, quantitative, and multi-faceted)” and covers a wide variety of research methods. Our symposium should be of interest to RM members for at least two reasons. First, we will present some state-of-the-art analytical methods that may be relevant to RM members interested in using new analytical techniques. In particular, the presentations include semantic network analysis, sentiment analysis, social network analysis, statistical analysis and multilevel ERGMs. Second, we will also discuss the theoretical underpinnings for applying these methods. Our discussant, Steve Borgatti, is one of the leading network scholars and well versed in theorizing about and analyzing networks. The discussion led by Steve promises to be exciting, as we expect lively discussions about the presented analyses and theories.

**Organizational Communication and Information Systems (OCIS)**

To deal “with the study of behavioral, economic, and social aspects of communication and information systems within and among organizations or institutions” is the domain of OCIS. Our symposium should be of great interest to OCIS members, because we contribute to the primary purpose of the division which is “to encourage professional scholarship in the fields of organizational communication and information systems” among AoM members. The presentations in our symposium specifically problematize organizational communication and the ways in which such communication can be conceptualized for organizational research. This symposium takes into account the complexity of social relations emerging in
organizational communication, and the meaning embedded in these relations. We believe that our symposium has the potential to encourage OCIS members to revisit their view of organizational communication, and to inspire them with recent theories about and methods to analyze organizational communication.

**PROPOSED FORMAT OF THE SYMPOSIUM**

For our 90-minutes presenter symposium, we propose the following format:

- **Introduction (about 5 minutes):** The organizer welcomes and introduces the panelists.
  - Presenter: Christine Moser

- **Presentations (15 minutes each):**
  - Social and Meaning Networks: Integrating Communication and Network Models, presented by Peter Groenewegen
  - Table for Two: Assessing the Effects of Authenticity Narratives on Critical Evaluations of Restaurants, presented by Francesca Pallotti
  - Ideas with Impact: How Centrality in a Content Network Shapes Idea Diffusion, presented by Dirk Deichmann
  - Bridging Cultural Holes: Organizational Vocabularies and Communication Networks across Organizational Subunits, presented by Stefano Tasselli

  The audience is welcome to participate in the discussion and pose questions.

- **Discussion and conclusion (25 minutes):**
  - Presenter: Steve Borgatti. Steve will discuss implications of networks of meaning for organization theory. In addition, he will focus on the empirical relevance of such networks, and how organizational scholars can put them to use. Audience and panel members are particularly invited to join the discussion!

The symposium does not require special logistics.
PRESENTATION SUMMARIES

Social and Meaning Networks: Integrating Communication and Network Models

Peter Groenewegen

Organizations can be understood as networks, and network research has played an important role in organization research. Network research has addressed a variety of different dimensions of the operation of organizations, looking at information networks, power structures, inter-organizational alliances, etc. More recently, texts in organizations, from organizations and connecting organizations have frequently been systematically studied. We have literature on social network structure and meanings in structural terms such as topic similarity but hardly any work that attends to the full picture.

In an increasingly digital organizational world interactions and communication takes place that leaves traces of the social structures as well as the ideas, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of people interacting on and with these platforms. In this changing world, the interest in network and other analytical tools has grown considerably. It has been argued that to approach such data and the communication processes producing them requires adaptation of theoretical approaches as well as methods to analyze these data (Howison, Wiggins, & Crowston, 2011; Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014). Systematically employing tools to aggregate meaning dimensions through topic modeling (McFarland et al., 2013) and theoretical interests in vocabularies (Loewenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012) can be combined with social network analysis (Lomi, Tasselli, & Zappa, 2017). Also, the study of innovation and knowledge-intensive work different projects have studied the two-mode networks of content and actors. In recent studies, the cognitive (dis)similarity has been proposed to influence creativity in social networks (Sosa, 2011).
In general, the amount of studies employing new tooling is on the increase. The logical ordering of these attempts is less well developed. I will integrate two frameworks. The first one that classifies network processes to characterize the different dimensions of social organization that has been captured by structural approaches. Network structures are proposed to fit a generalized network framework which distinguishes network understandings arising from social processes divided over thinking into structural positions or states and those that are based on flows (Borgatti, Brass, & Halgin, 2014). These two main branches of social network research each with two sub-branches. The state of a social system and versus the type of ties derived from the events (transfers of ideas and information, exchanges of resources) taking place in a system. This distinction is vital for the relation between meaning and social networks. The manner in which network structures are derived from prior defined information on the social system (which is true for the social state) or the use of dynamic information on content (which is predominantly true for events).

The second framework draws on the four flow model of the communicative constitution of organizations as framed by McPhee and Zaug (2009). Their model is framed as a bundle diverse efforts to characterize communication lenses on organization with the concept of the constitution as introduced by Giddens. Four flows of communication in organizations provide a frame for different ways do categorize meaning in communication in organizations, as episodes in communication in which multiple participants engage in leading to what they call “networkness” of the outcome. The first flow of communication concerns assessment of who are members or not of the organization, discussions on us versus them similar to descriptions of states. The second flow constitutes the interaction between organizational members on the manner in how to undertake tasks within the organization. In this flow of communication, the discussion of principles of structure, but also the formulating of organizational processes, roles and responsibilities and financial responsibilities. With
attention to content carving out different types of communication in the organization on knowledge exchange, meetings and discussions also could be tracked about roles and functions (Groenewegen & Moser, 2014; Moser, Ganley, & Groenewegen, 2013). The third flow of concerns activity coordination. One of the examples of such flows of communication on tasks has been detailed in the PCANS model (Krackhardt & Carley, 1998) research where the integration of content drives the interaction in organizational settings into the relational network. In the PCANS models, as in similar later workflow directed models (Conaldi & Lomi, 2013), analyzing a two or three mode networks connects social relations, tools and activities. The fourth flow places the organization in comparison to others the overall system is discussed. Ocasio, Loewenstein, and Nigam (2015) propose four communicative functions for ordering the communicative acts of organizations. They label these functions as coordinating, sense giving, translating and theorizing. In their presentation, they propose that these types of communication are linked to the institutional logics of the organization. While the four flow model emphasizes organizational communication acts, in the work of Ocasio et al. the view is towards the theorizing of the manner in which institutional logics (following Thornton & Ocasio, 2008) as cultural structures are functioning in ordering the practice domains of organizing. Their perspective: “(…) that although institutional logics scale up and thereby emerge from situated communicative events distributed throughout organizations and institutional fields, they have an ontological reality (…).”

The two frameworks can be brought together in one multilevel framework that serves two purposes. It defines interlinked areas of theory development and methods, with a common basis in measurement of interaction and content. This multilevel framework orders unconnected areas in which external roles of organizations, their internal behavior, and external connections can be characterized and analyzed. Communicative events (which can be many and different elements ranging from interpersonal interactions, press releases,
briefings, press releases and news releases) are an essential part of both frameworks. The reasoning in both cases is that those events contain both knowledge and information about and produced by organizations. By integrating these different views, it opens new options to analyze differentiation (of relations and meaning between the different flows and domains) and issues of synchronization. Thus the purpose of this contribution is to use the two main strands of thinking to push empirical work and theoretical thinking on what constitutes the structure and meaning of and in organizations.

**Table for Two: Assessing the Effects of Authenticity Narratives on Critical Evaluations of Restaurants**

Vitaliano Barberio, Alessandro Lomi, and Francesca Pallotti

We contribute to the symposium “Networks of meaning” by discussing work in progress on how specific meaning structures emerging from narratives of authenticity shape the critical evaluation of restaurants – organizations for which concepts of authenticity has been shown to be particularly salient. We build on a major line of contemporary organizational research that examines the role of authenticity in the collective assessment and critical evaluation of organizations (Carroll, 2015). The main idea behind this work is that authenticity represents both a meaningful dimension of organizational identities, as well as a positive value for the relevant audiences (Baron, 2004; Carroll and Wheaton, 2009). According to this view, the evaluation of organizational offerings is driven by judgments that the relevant audience segments express on authenticity claims put forth by organizations.

Building on recent results, in this paper we present the preliminary analysis of how food critics’ evaluation of restaurants and sentiments relate to judgements of authenticity of individual ingredients vary across national cuisines and across types of restaurants. We want to understand, for example, why “olives” tend to attract positive critical evaluations in the context
of Greek restaurants, while the same “olives” tend to be associated with negative evaluations in the context of Vietnamese cuisine. Also, we want to understand how serving olives will affect critical evaluations of a “Greek-Vietnamese” restaurant. Extant research has shown that consumers tend to assign positive value to offerings perceived as authentic (Kovács, Carroll, and Lehman, 2014). In this paper, we complement available results by examining the common, but infrequently tested assumption that authenticity narratives are universally associated with positive evaluations of food critics. We study the contextual factors that trigger the positive evaluation of the elements that food critics associate with authenticity.

We explore the conjecture that observed variations in the evaluations of food critics are related to the notion of authenticity. For the purpose of this study, we define authenticity of a restaurant in terms of its affiliation to multiple national cuisines interpreted as institutionalized social categories, and in terms of the relative prevalence of ingredients in each cuisine.

We define as “authentic” ingredients that have an exclusive association with cuisines and we examine how the semantic network structure of authenticity narratives changes across cuisines. We examine how authenticity defined in this way interacts with the identities of the restaurants defined in terms of membership in ethnic categories. In our analysis, a restaurant is considered “inauthentic” when it contains combination of ingredients that are unusual for the ethnic category to which the restaurant is assigned. We analyze the semantic network structure of critical evaluations for authentic and inauthentic restaurants. We want to understand when unusual combinations of ingredients are considered “innovative” – and hence evaluated positively by food critics (Rao, Monin & Durand, 2005).

The analysis is based on textual data that we have extracted from the corpus of restaurants reviews published in The New Yorker weekly magazine between 2001 and 2013 (called “Table for two”). Starting from an aggregate corpus of approximately 300,000 (non-unique) words, we construct three bipartite networks of restaurants-cuisines, ingredients-
cuisines, and ingredients-restaurants, which include 512 distinct ingredients (from “abalone” to “zucchini”), 42 distinct national cuisines (from American to Vietnamese), and 547 restaurants reviewed during the observation period. We adopt semantic network analysis and sentiment analysis techniques to understand how the meaning authenticity narratives associated with specific ingredients vary across national cuisines.

We discuss the implications of our work for both organization theory, and in particular for current research on institutional logics of organizing and role identities (Monin & Durand, 2003). The results of our study contribute to recent research on organizational identity by showing how critical judgements of authenticity interact with categorical identities jointly to shape audience evaluations.

**Ideas with Impact: How Centrality in a Content Network Shapes Idea Diffusion**

Dirk Deichmann, Julie M. Birkholz, Christine Moser, Adina Nerghes, Peter Groenewegen, and Shenghui Wang

Scholars and practitioners have for many decades studied why some new ideas turn out to be successful and diffuse while others do not gain traction and remain unnoticed (Katz, Levin, & Hamilton, 1963; Rogers, 2003). One of the factors that explains successful idea diffusion is the network position of the team that is working on an idea – the inventor team (Abrahamson & Rosenkopf, 1997; McFadyen & Cannella, 2004; Wejnert, 2002). However, while our knowledge about potentially beneficial social network positions of inventor teams has continuously increased, little attention has been paid to an idea’s position in a network and how this possibly affects successful idea diffusion. We address this gap by focusing on how new ideas connect to other ideas in a “content network.” In content networks, connections between two ideas mean that both ideas have content (i.e., words) in common with which the ideas are described. Connections between ideas therefore illustrate a specific form of idea
blending and recombination (Hargadon & Sutton, 1997; Harvey, 2014), with a focus on the semantics used to describe ideas. An idea might share certain content with another idea, but other content with yet a different idea which would thus be seen as a blend between the first two ideas. By studying the position of an idea in a content network, we shift the primary focus from the characteristics of inventor teams to the characteristics of the idea. Our approach allows us to capture exactly how an idea is connected to other ideas and, therefore, the degree to which this idea is a blend and recombination of already existing ideas, as well as how this affects subsequent idea diffusion.

Focusing on how an idea connects to other ideas in a content network is important for at least two reasons. First, in order to better understand the successful diffusion of ideas, it is necessary to not only focus on the social network position of the team of inventors of an idea, but shed light on the characteristics of the idea itself that is being promoted, as well (Goldenberg, Lehmann, & Mazursky, 2001). We do so by studying the network position of an idea in a content network, particularly its “betweenness centrality” (Everett & Borgatti, 1999; Freeman, 1977). A high betweenness centrality in a content network tells us how well an idea is embedded in, and connected to, other types of ideas. In contrast to other text-analytical methods such as topic-modelling, this network approach helps us to account for the meaning structures of ideas and to identify those ideas which bridge established thematic domains (Cucchiarelli, D’Antonio, & Velardi, 2012; Leydesdorff & Nerghes, 2015). On a semantic level, we therefore assess the degree to which an idea is a blend or recombination of existing ideas and subsequently study how this helps or hinders idea diffusion. Second, combining a content network analysis of the key concepts of these ideas with a social network analysis of the inventor team allows us to provide important insights on the separate and multiplicative effects of the different network positions on idea diffusion. In other words, we can disentangle the effects of a team’s position in the social network from effects that are driven by the idea’s
position in the content network. The basic notion is that different combinations of social and content network positions can lead to different outcomes in terms of idea diffusion.

In our study, we focus on the diffusion of scholarly ideas, communicated through their dissemination in scientific publications. We measure idea diffusion by the citation scores of a publication. We investigate the Semantic Web research community, a sub-field of computer science, which develops structures and processes to organize, access, and share information on the Web. The majority of ideas in this field are disseminated through conferences. We investigate publication data, including the title and author information, from the Semantic Web Conference Corpus, and complement this data with citation scores from Microsoft Academic Search. Our findings support our hypotheses that high content network centrality has a positive effect on idea diffusion and that this effect is further enhanced when the team has high social network centrality. To that end, our study extends prior literature in that we show that content and social network positions alone only offer a partial explanation for why some ideas successfully diffuse while others do not. Much depends on the interaction between an idea’s position in the content network and a team’s position in the social network. When optimally combined, a new idea gains acceptance and legitimacy in a community so that it can be called a success (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008).

Bridging Cultural Holes: Organizational Vocabularies and Communication Networks Across Organizational Subunits

Stefano Tasselli, Paola Zappa, and Alessandro Lomi

Knowledge, advice and communication patterns across formal organizational boundaries are widely acknowledged as important determinants of organizational effectiveness (Argote & Ingram 2000). A considerable body of research shows that organizations whose
subunits are able to absorb knowledge from different, and possibly distant sources tend to attain higher levels of performance, productivity, and growth (Argote 1999; Hansen 1999; Hargadon 2002).

However, the difficulties associated with sharing knowledge across organizational subunits, i.e. across bounded repositories of specialized expertise, competencies and resources (Dougherty 1992), make this learning process unlikely to happen naturally in organizations (Tsai 2001). Socialization processes encourage members of organizational subunits to develop specialized language that allows them to communicate effectively with colleagues. A common specialized language, in turn, sustains a shared awareness of problems, solutions, and the repertoire of actions that are appropriate in various situations. Enacting this logic of identity (March 1991) makes organizational subunits both more internally cohesive and efficient, as well as less permeable to extramural information and knowledge stored in different and possibly distant sites within the organization (Tortoriello & Krackhardt 2010; Tsai 2002).

This tension between processes of “differentiation” and “integration” (Haas, 2010) has been known to students of organizations at least since Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) and possibly much before then (Barnard 1938). More recent studies have tried to resolve this tension by focusing on the specific relational mechanisms that may sustain the infrequent but important boundary crossing ties recurrently observed in actual organizations (Caimo & Lomi 2015; Reagans & McEvily 2003). This line of work builds on – and extends – the classic insight about the duality of individuals in groups (Breiger 1974), implying that “when two individuals interact, they not only represent an interpersonal tie, but they also represent the groups of which they are members” (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve & Tsai 2004: 801). Despite the emphasis on individuals’ action and interaction, attention has been mostly paid to the structural side of boundary spanning (Tortoriello, Reagans & McEvily 2012). But boundaries among subunits also imply boundaries around “zones of meaning” (Berger & Luckmann 1966),
and hence around organizational vocabularies, i.e. systems of words that individuals use to make sense of their organizational experience (Loewenstein, Ocasio & Jones 2012). Because of their novelty, concepts of organizational vocabularies are not yet well-integrated in mainstream organizational research. However, we think that organizational vocabularies offer important “opportunities for theoretical integration and novel extensions for organizational research and practice” (Loewenstein et al., 2012:35). The specific opportunity that we have identified in this work concerns the unexplored question of how patterns of similarity and difference in organizational vocabularies affect communication networks within organizations. How does the overlap in organizational vocabularies affect communication and information sharing relations across formal organizational boundaries? This is the question that we address in this study.

We think that asking this question opens new possibilities for integrating research on organizational vocabularies focused on institutional logics (Ocasio & Joseph 2005; Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy 2004; Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012), and organizational social networks focused on structural logics (Rank, Robins & Pattison, 2010; Tortoriello et al., 2012). Following almost independent developments, these two literatures have rarely explored their multiple intersections (Mohr & Duquenne 1997, Mohr 2000). We do so in this work by showing that formal boundaries between organizational units contribute to the development of within-unit social communication patterns and within-unit homogeneity of vocabularies and meanings. Yet, sharing common vocabularies allows organizational members to span those boundaries and communicate meaningful information across different organizational units.

A new emphasis on organizational vocabularies allows us to make three contributions to theory and research on knowledge sharing in organizational networks. First, we move beyond a purely structural interpretation of intra-organizational boundary spanning ties (Blau, 1977) and consider organizational subunits in an organization (or subsidiaries in a multi-unit
group, in the specific case we analyze) as local foci of activities that are associated with the formation of idiosyncratic systems of meanings and distinctive local identities (Feld, 1982). Because “understanding actors’ meanings – including vocabularies – is crucial for any analysis of social structure” (Fine & Kleinman 1983: 106), we focus on how organizational vocabularies shape social networks in organizations. Previous research has tended to neglect considerations of the words people use to describe their experience in the workplace, arguing that social structures and processes "vastly transcend the individual consciousness of actors" (Lorrain & White 1971: 50). In this study, we incorporate organizational vocabularies to balance the structural emphasis of previous research on boundary spanning.

Second, we contribute to research on the interdependence between formal organizational boundaries and informal structures of interpersonal interaction within organizations. With its emphasis on informal relationships between actors, social network research has progressively downplayed the fundamental role that formal organizational structure continues to play in processes of knowledge creation, reformulation and exchange (Hansen 2002). We build on recent insights (Kleinbaum, Stuart & Tushman 2013; McEvily, Soda & Tortoriello, 2014) to argue that the “company behind the chart” (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993) interacts with the formal organizational “chart” in explaining knowledge sharing across boundaries. We suggest that how organizational structure affects communication patterns, and hence the individuals’ likelihood to communicate across unit boundaries, is likely to be contingent on the systems of shared organizational vocabularies that individuals adopt to describe their organizational units.

Third, we contribute to contemporary research on meaning, culture and social networks (Mische 2003, Pachucki & Breiger 2010) by examining the intersection between meaning structures (as instantiated by the association between organizational participants and organizational vocabularies), and social structure (emerging from task-related communication
networks among organizational participants). As Pachucki and Breiger (2010: 206) suggest, “contemporary work on culture and social networks can (...) be usefully seen as mutually constitutive and coevolving with common roots in relational thinking.” However, much empirical analysis has “tended to treat these domains as discrete realms rather than together” (Pachucki & Breiger 2010: 206). We seize upon this opportunity for integration by framing organizational vocabularies and social networks as connected sub-components of a more general system of meaning within organizations. The hope is that research on organizational vocabularies will benefit from a more systematic attention on the social structure of vocabularies. Research on organizational social networks will benefit from a broader concern with issues of meaning carried, produced and reproduced by network ties.

We find empirical evidence for the theoretical arguments we develop in a study of task-related communication networks among members of the top management team of a multinational industrial group including five distinct subsidiary companies. Building on the consideration that “network structure can be studied as a proxy for the distribution of variably sticky information in a population” (Burt, Kilduff & Tasselli, 2013: 529), task related communication captures knowledge sharing processes between managers in the organization. In line with recent research analyzing the multilevel arrangement of network ties within organizations (Zappa & Lomi, 2015), we specify and estimate Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGM) for multilevel networks (Wang et al., 2013) that allow us to represent simultaneously communication networks among managers and affiliation networks linking manages and words they use to describe their subsidiary company.
REFERENCES


