

The
LANGUAGE

of

ORGANIZATIONAL

Styling

LIONEL WEE

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The Language of Organizational Styling

The ways in which commercial organizations and service providers style themselves – creating the image they wish to portray to their potential consumers – is a long-established area of research in the fields of sociology and business studies. However, language also plays an important role in organizational styling, which until now has been largely overlooked in the literature.

This is the first book-length study of the linguistics of organizational styling, looking at the language and semiotic resources used by holiday resorts, pharmaceutical companies, restaurants and insurance companies in order to project their identities and style themselves. It discusses in detail a number of case studies and presents an innovative take on the notion of style, as well as bringing together work from linguistics, business studies and sociology.

This interdisciplinary book will be of interest to scholars and advanced students in sociolinguistics, and scholars of sociology and business studies.

LIONEL WEE is a professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore.

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1 Introduction: the organization as a corporate actor

Why organizations?

Why would a watch manufacturer like Wyler want to tout its status as a carbon neutral company? What motivates a luxury resort chain like the Banyan Tree to announce its commitment to community development and the protection of indigenous wildlife? How is it that a pharmaceutical chain like Walgreens can describe its history as one of “innovation, growth and industry leadership” without coming across as unduly immodest? How does a charity like Singapore’s National Kidney Foundation try to regain public trust after a scandal over the misuse of funds? And what does a small Indian restaurant in Malaysia hope to gain (at least according to McDonald’s) by naming itself “McCurry”? To answer these and other related questions, it is necessary to pay attention to how organizations constitute themselves, the identities they aim to project, the relationships they attempt to cultivate, and the semiotic resources they marshal towards such ends.

But while the study of organizations is well established in sociology and business studies, the same cannot be said about sociolinguistics. Yet, as I show in this book, a sociolinguistic approach has much to offer by way of providing interesting and insightful answers to questions such as those posed above. And it is important to try and answer these questions, not least because organizations are a key defining feature of modern society, with their activities responsible for shaping much of contemporary social life (Adler 2009).

The aim of this book, then, is twofold: to articulate an analytical framework that recognizes the organization as an entity of sociolinguistic interest and significance, and to also demonstrate the empirical viability of this framework via a number of case studies. The current chapter lays the foundation for this framework, which is then developed in the next chapter. The case studies are discussed in the chapters that follow.

There are clearly many different things that could be studied about organizations. But in order to answer questions such as those presented above, the current chapter draws on studies in sociology, anthropology, political economy and cultural geography to highlight a number of relatively robust factors that

merit specific consideration. These include the institutional environment within which organizations struggle for survival and legitimacy; the hegemonic status of neoliberalism and enterprise culture in shaping organizational activity and identity; and the identity economy, where there is increased emphasis placed by organizations on the competitive cultivation of semiotic resources in response to the commodification of identity. Towards the close of the chapter, a case will be made that our understanding of these factors can be usefully developed from a style-theoretic perspective (Coupland 2007; Eckert and Rickford 2001; Rampton 1999). This style-theoretic perspective on organizations is then described in detail in chapter 2.

The ubiquity of organizations

Albrow (1997: 29) defines organizations “as social units where individuals are conscious of their membership and legitimize their cooperative activities by reference to the attainment of impersonal goals rather than to moral standards.”¹ As entities that have been created or established in order to serve particular goals (Blau and Scott 1963: 1; Parsons 1960: 17), organizations have access to more resources than (unorganized) individuals, and they can arguably therefore exert greater influence in achieving those goals.

Moreover, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that organizations of various sorts are proliferating. Activist groups, social movements, charities, oversight or regulatory agencies, multinational corporations and their subsidiaries, social enterprises, small startups – these represent just some of the many types of organizations that are already populating the social landscape. But it is not just the types of organizations that are on the increase. Tokens of these types, too, are on the upswing. For example, widespread concern about the effects of climate change has led to the creation of organizations such as the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, the Climate Institute, C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, and the Earth Lab Foundation, to name just a few. Societal demand for greater access to education also has led to the establishment of more schools and universities. The small city-state of Singapore, for example, used to have just two major universities, the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University. As of 2012, however, there are also the Singapore Management University, SIM University, the Singapore University of Technology and Design, and the Singapore Institute of Technology. This list does not even include the many overseas universities that have decided to set up campuses in Singapore. And of course, the success of

¹ The only qualification that needs to be made to Albrow’s definition concerns his reference to “moral standards.” As we will see below, both moral standards as well as ethical issues are relevant considerations (see also the discussion about ancillary activities in chapter 2).

a global coffee chain like Starbucks has encouraged many entrepreneurs to start their own cafés, or at least attempt to model their cafés along the lines of Starbucks in the hopes of emulating its success. In this regard, the Taiwanese chain Ecoffee has been accused by Starbucks of infringing on its trademark (see chapter 7 for details). And depending on whether one counts the individual members of a chain or the individual franchisees of a franchise as separate organizations, the argument that organizations are on the increase can become even more compelling.

As organizations proliferate (in types as well as tokens), they become harder to ignore because of the goods or services they provide to us as consumers, because it is an inescapable fact that many of us work for organizations, because we are answerable in one way or another to government agencies, and because we do find ourselves encountering organizational representatives who are either raising money for particular charities or attempting to collect signatures in order to lobby for social changes. Given their ubiquity, it is ironic to observe that organizations have, however, not often constituted the direct objects of sociolinguistic investigation (chapter 2). Organizations have instead mainly been of interest insofar as they form the contextual backdrop against which the sociolinguistic practices of individuals or communities are impeded or enabled. Nevertheless, once we start thinking of the organization as a sociolinguistic research object in its own right, we need to ask how such an entity might be approached. But before situating the study of organizations in relation to sociolinguistic conceptualization, it is useful to look at what scholars in adjacent disciplines have had to say.

The institutional environment

Though it should probably not come as a surprise, it is still worth making the point that early studies of organizations tended to be predicated on the assumption that organizational structures and activities are influenced mainly by considerations of efficiency (Scott and Meyer 1983). The institutional theory of organizations (Scott 2001, 2004), in contrast, argues that “organizations are influenced by normative pressures, sometimes arising from external sources such as the state, other times arising from within the organization itself” (Zucker 1987: 443). This response to normative pressure is a survival mechanism to gain legitimacy and, in attempting to do so, organizations often adopt practices and structures that may even have a negative impact on efficiency. That is, the institutional theory argues that the formal structures of organizations “dramatically reflect the myths of their institutional environments instead of the demands of their work activities” (Meyer and Rowan 1991: 41). According to Meyer and Rowan (1991: 44):

Many of the positions, policies, programs, and procedures of modern organizations are enforced by public opinion, by the views of important constituents, by knowledge legitimated through the educational system, by social prestige, by the laws, and by the definitions of negligence and prudence used by the courts. Such elements of formal structure are manifestations of powerful institutional rules which function as highly rationalized myths that are binding on particular organizations.

Here is an example: the series of “We agree” advertisements from the oil company Chevron. According to Chevron, the goal of this advertising campaign is to highlight:

the common ground Chevron shares with people around the world on key energy issues. It also describes the actions the company takes in producing energy responsibly and in supporting the communities where it operates.²

Available from the company’s website, this consists of a number of posters with statements such as “Oil companies should support the communities they’re a part of,” “Oil companies should support small business,” “Protecting the planet is everyone’s job” and “It’s time oil companies get behind the development of renewable energy.” Each of these statements is accompanied by the phrase “I agree” as well as a link entitled “What Chevron is doing.” Clicking on the “What Chevron is doing” link brings the reader to a page where Chevron provides relevant descriptions of its efforts in relation to the associated statement. For example, the link on the poster “Oil companies should support the communities they’re a part of” brings the reader to a page that contains, among others, messages from Chevron’s Executive Vice President (Policy and Planning) and the Executive Director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. These messages give details of collaborative efforts between these two organizations as they try to improve the health of communities around the world.

It is clear that what Chevron is trying to do via these advertisements is to demonstrate to the general public that, in addition to its goal of producing and selling oil, the company is also engaged in supporting small businesses and local communities, protecting the environment, and investing in clean renewable energy. Moreover, Chevron wants to convey that there is no conflict between these activities, that is, it has no problems being equally committed to these different goals. Stances of commitment and sincerity therefore become of analytical interest in the study of organizations. Finally, Chevron presumes (rightly) that environmental sustainability and community development represent institutional myths that are already widely supported by the general public (hence, “We agree”) rather than being values that might be controversial or, worse, that would draw public condemnation.

² “Chevron launches new global advertising campaign: ‘We agree’”; www.chevron.com/chevron/pressreleases, accessed January 2, 2014.

The influence of “institutional myths” on organizational structure can lead to a point where organizations might even become isomorphic with their institutional environments. This is perhaps one reason why organizations are sometimes also described as institutions. It is useful to maintain a distinction between the two, though. Institutions are social norms that are entrenched to varying degrees. Marriage, religion, education, the family, and language are all institutions. An organization is then isomorphic with its institutional environment to the extent that it represents specific institutions. One interesting implication of this isomorphism is that organizations operating within the same institutional environments, and hence, responding to the same set of institutional myths, will tend to be similar (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; see also Lewin, Weigelt and Emery 2004: 134). The proliferation of organizations concerned with climate change (mentioned above) is one such example of isomorphism (between organizations and the institutional environment) and similarity (across organizations).

This implication is certainly interesting although we need to be aware that the institutional environment is not itself homogeneous. This is because “institutional myths” are normalized to different degrees in different societies, and organizations have different degrees of freedom in deciding whether to abide by these myths. Some organizations may challenge or even reject some of the myths. For example, the Slow Food movement is a rejection of what its founders saw as an undesirable lifestyle; the movement describes itself as “a global, grassroots organization . . . founded in 1989 to counter the rise of fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world.”³ Other organizations are expected to embrace certain other myths because of the cities they happen to be part of. Thus, because gay rights are treated as a key value embraced by the city of San Francisco, businesses like the Body Shop and Macy’s, as well as local government organizations, all proudly declare their support for homosexual lifestyles. In contrast, because Singapore sees itself as a more conservative Asian city, the consequence is that the Body Shop outlets in Singapore do not make the same public declaration as their San Francisco counterparts. But in Singapore, multiculturalism and respect for ethnic diversity are key values and while businesses are not expected to publicly declare their commitment to these values, they are certainly expected to respect them. This relatively “passive” stance towards multiculturalism and ethnic diversity contrasts with the responsibility of a government organization like the People’s Association, which is expected to actively champion such values.

³ www.slowfood.com/international/1/about-us?; accessed December 17, 2012.

The foregoing considerations make it more useful to think of organizations *in the default* as “actors” rather than “agents”, though the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. But as Archer (1995: 280) suggests, while it is of course possible for the same entity to be both actor and agent, it is “analytically invaluable” to distinguish between the two. Actors are “role incumbents” and are typically constrained by the associated “rule requirements” whereas agents may choose to inhabit and conform to their assigned roles or challenge them (Archer 1995: 278–80). In this regard, characterizing organizations as actors brings into relief the fact that they are first and foremost created to pursue specific goals and their continued legitimacy often depends on them conforming to various regulatory requirements and institutional myths. Thus, even though the Slow Food movement was created as a counter to what the founders saw as a fast food lifestyle, the key fact here is that its creation was a reflection of a shared desire amongst a particular group of individuals to promote a different kind of lifestyle. This alternative lifestyle represents its own institutional myth, albeit one that is perhaps less hegemonic than that which it seeks to counter. But having been so created, the movement is now expected to behave in ways that conform to a lifestyle where local produce and traditions are privileged.

At the same time, I want to stress that this characterization of the organization as actor is not meant to exclude the possibility of organizations, *qua* agents, challenging or departing from their assigned roles and responsibilities. Organizations are certainly not just passive actors that simply respond to institutional constraints.⁴ Thus, we noted earlier that the Slow Food movement was created specifically to counter what its founders saw as an undesirable move towards a fast-paced lifestyle. The key point to bear in mind is that for such an “activist” or “countering” organization to emerge, there must be a group of individuals who are prepared to mobilize and work together in pursuit of a shared goal (Albrow 1997: 29; see above). In such cases, the notion of institutional myths still applies, albeit to myths of lesser hegemonic status. The organization that is subsequently created still needs to be understood as an actor occupying a particular role or institutional configuration in society. Any departure from this role will often lead to questions – either from members of the organization, the general public or higher level regulatory agencies – about the organization’s legitimacy and whether it should be allowed to continue existing (see the discussion of accountability in chapter 2).

Organizations can also sometimes be transformative by changing the status of institutional myths, making it a “cool” lifestyle issue, for example, for consumers to be interested in topics such as the eradication of poverty or disease. Thus, Richey and Ponte (2011) discuss the phenomenon of “compassionate consumption,” where consumers are enjoined to purchase goods from

⁴ I thank Joseph Park for raising this point.

Converse, the Gap or Armani on the grounds that a percentage of the profits will go towards a global fund for fighting AIDS or malaria. But Richey and Ponte (2011: xiii–xiv, *italics added*) also point out that the participating organizations do so in order to “raise their CSR [corporate social responsibility] profile without substantially *changing their normal business practices* while consumers engage in low-cost heroism without meaningfully increasing their awareness of global production-consumption relations or the struggles of living with HIV/AIDS.” Even here, therefore, we must appreciate that, one, the participating organizations are still staying true to their primary purpose of profit generation and, two, this is with the cooperation of consumers, for whom “low-cost heroism” is appealing since they are then able to help others while still engaged in their preferred activity of shopping. What this suggests is that any transformative potential of an organization is often mitigated by the organization’s need or obligation to remain true to the purpose which it was originally set up to pursue, and by the cooperation and collaboration of the clientele that it purports to serve.

As we now see, it is actually useful to think of organizations as not just actors, but *corporate actors*, given that organizations of all sorts are being modeled along the lines of the corporation.⁵

Neoliberalism and enterprise culture

Neoliberalism asserts that organizations and individuals perform their best within the demands of the free market economy. As Harvey (2005: 3, citing Treanor, no date given) puts it:

In so far as neoliberalism values market exchange as “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs”, it emphasizes the significance of contractual relations in the marketplace. It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.

As a consequence, one notable offshoot of neoliberal ideology has been the emergence of enterprise culture, in which qualities such as autonomy, innovation, creativity, strategy and the ability to respond quickly to competition are highly valued. These qualities are regarded as “human virtues and promoted as such” (du Gay 1996: 56). Du Gay (1996: 181, *italics in original*) even suggests

⁵ Brummans, Cooren and Chaput (2009: 54) use the phrase “collective agents” to describe organizations. While this phrase has its merits, it is problematic to treat organizations as “agents,” if this is not conceptually distinguished from “actors” (see the reference to Archer above). Also, the use of “collective” tends to give an impression of organizational unity when any such unity is in fact an abstraction over the many different parts of an organization that may sometimes act independently of or in conflict with each other. For a discussion of such conflict, see chapter 5.

that the “character of the entrepreneur can no longer be seen as just one among a plurality of ethical personalities, *but must rather be seen as assuming an ontological priority*.” The pervasiveness and highly normative effects of enterprise culture have led Cohen and Musson (2000: 31) to suggest that:

... even if people do not take the enterprise culture seriously, even if they feel unaffected by its values and claims, they are inevitably reproducing it through their involvement with the daily practices which are imbued with the notion of enterprise. (du Gay and Salaman 1992)

Thus, du Gay (2000: 165), speaking of developments in the United Kingdom under the Thatcher and Major administrations, observes that:⁶

The state is no longer to be required to answer all of society’s needs for health, security, order or productivity. Individuals, firms, organizations, “communities”, schools, parents and housing estates must themselves take on – as “partners” – a greater proportion of the responsibility for resolving these issues... Organizations and other actants that were once enmeshed in what are represented as the “bureaucratic” lines of force of the “social” state are to be made more responsible for securing their own future survival and well-being.

Enterprise culture has been acknowledged to have significant implications for the identity construction and communication practices of both individuals and organizations (du Gay 1996; Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996; Holborow 2012: 50; Keat and Abercrombie 1991; Scheuer 2001; Wee 2011b; Wee and Brooks 2012, see chapter 3). Even ethnic cultural identity has been reconfigured to highlight the “ethnic entrepreneur” (DeHart 2010), where ethnic membership itself is seen as conferring values and knowledge that might contribute positively to the development of the ethnic community. As a result of the hegemonic status of neoliberalism and enterprise culture (Harvey 2005; Keat and Abercrombie 1991; Ong 2006), individuals, groups, as well as organizations are all increasingly expected to demonstrate enterprising qualities or, at the very least, show that they are attempting to cultivate these qualities. The absence of such qualities would constitute social transgressions (du Gay 1996: 60). In this sense, enterprise culture represents a powerful institutional myth that organizations (as well as individuals and groups) are compelled to embrace in order to legitimize their existence and activities.

In the specific case of organizations, organizational activities then might well be legitimized or justified in terms of how well these serve to respond to the market, that is, how innovative these activities are, especially as ways of successfully dealing with competition from other organizations or in satisfying consumer demand. Even linguistic and cultural differences among employees,

⁶ For similar observations in an Asian context, see Ong (2006). For a broader historical overview of the rise of neoliberalism across the globe, see Harvey (2005).

under the rubric of diversity management, has become treated as a resource that should be utilized to better help organizations achieve their goals (Park 2013). For organizations, this means becoming more like corporations, and this observation has led Comaroff and Comaroff (2009: 120, and quoting Silbey 2007) to point out that:

Their [Corporations': LW] autonomy was further enhanced in the late twentieth century with the rise of neoliberalism, which encouraged the outsourcing of the functions of state to the private sector. This has revitalized the early-modern role of corporations in running hospitals and prisons, even waging war – if with a more overtly privatized profit motive. Moreover, at a time when entrepreneurialism is coming to dominate human activity, their *modus operandi* is being emulated across the social spectrum: in churches, charities, voluntary associations, NGOs, social movements, government itself. “The original virtual person,” notes Susan Silbey, is “the quintessential post-modern actor.”

Thus, even organizations that are not, strictly speaking, corporations, see themselves as “virtual” persons, as entities with specific and distinct identities that need to be cultivated, managed and protected. And the kind of organizational identity that needs to be cultivated is increasingly one that makes a claim to the possession of enterprising qualities (chapter 3).

The identity economy

While enterprise culture is indeed a powerful institutional myth that organizations are expected to embrace, it is of course not necessarily the case that all organizations will do so. And even where they do, different organizations will have to do so in different ways given the constraints imposed by the various goals that organizations pursue. A university will have to present its enterprising credentials in ways that are consistent with its focus on education and research, whereas a restaurant may do so in ways that are more traditionally oriented towards financial gains.

At this point, an organization's agency (as distinct from its actorhood) becomes more salient because each organization has to decide just what set of institutional myths it is prepared to select as relevant to its goals and identity. The notion of an ethical regime is appropriate in characterizing those specific institutional myths that the organization decides are worth taking on board. According to Ong (2006: 22):

An ethical regime can therefore be construed as a style of living guided by given values for constituting oneself in line with a particular ethical goal. Religions – and, I would argue, feminism, humanitarianism, and other schemes of virtue – are ethical regimes fostering particular forms of self-conduct and visions of the good life.

Enterprise culture clearly constitutes an ethical regime in Ong's (2006) sense of the term. As we have noted, it promotes particular attributes as worth cultivating and, indeed, lauding. We will see in the later chapters that other institutional myths, such as support for local communities and "green" initiatives, are also widely embraced ethical regimes, that is, myths that many organizations want to be seen as actively endorsing. The notion of an ethical regime is therefore useful because it allows us to give cognizance to the fact the institutional environment is not necessarily homogeneous. And even in an environment where some institutional myths are highly hegemonic, individuals sharing the same counter-hegemonic perspectives may band together to form an organization precisely in order to promote other contrarian ethical regimes, as in the case of the Slow Food movement (above).

All of which leads us to the identity economy. Comaroff and Comaroff (2009: 136–7) suggest that the commodification of identity in late modernity, or "Identity, Inc.," is "metamorphosing and migrating to places it has not been before," citing as examples the tendency by, among others, religious and national organizations to claim as copyrightable cultural properties the various social practices associated with faith and ethnic heritage. In other words, as part of their attempts at protecting and enhancing their religious or ethnic identities, the claimant organizations are aiming to exercise greater control over who gets to engage in the relevant practices, as well as what might count as the appropriate ways of engaging in such practices. In the identity economy, image and identity are commodities that the organization jealously safeguards because they are the key strategic resources by which an organization can distinguish itself from competing organizations. Harvey (2012: 92) points out that the more easily marketable goods and services are, the "less unique and special they appear" and the more susceptible to "replication by forgeries, fakes, imitations, or simulacra." Consequently, there is greater reliance on "the power of collective symbolic capital, of special marks of distinction" (Harvey 2012: 103). Harvey (2012: 103) also suggests that "Bourdieu, to whom we owe the general usage of these terms, unfortunately restricts them to individuals . . . when it seems to me that the collective forms . . . might be of even greater interest."

Harvey is certainly right. There is no reason why the notion of collective symbolic capital should be restricted to individuals when it applies just as well to organizations, since the pressure from market competition also requires organizations to "raise their quotient of symbolic capital and to increase their marks of distinction" (Harvey 2012: 103). The challenge for organizations is to do so while still being able to pursue the goals that motivated and justified their establishment, and maintaining legitimacy by demonstrating commitment to specific ethical regimes. There are then potential tensions that need to be managed by organizations between the pursuit of distinction, on the one hand, and the need to be faithful to goals and ethical regimes.

Furthermore, symbolic capital is fundamentally discursive in nature, where discourse is understood here as a “general mode of semiosis” (Blommaert 2005a: 2). This is because “claims to uniqueness, authenticity, particularity, and specialty . . . are as much an outcome of discursive constructions and struggles as they are grounded in material fact” (Harvey 2012: 103). The power of symbolic capital ultimately rests on how successfully an organization is able to deploy the linguistic and non-linguistic resources at its disposal in order to project the desired identity. We will see in the chapters that follow that claims about industry leadership, innovativeness, and a sincere commitment to environmental sustainability, among others, involve the use of mini-genres such as vision and mission statements, larger historical narratives of organizational growth and expansion, as well as “small stories” (Bamberg 2006). We will also see that social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) represent a further set of resources that organizations are increasingly obligated to draw on if they are to sustain their symbolic capital so that, unlike individuals, who might have the option of not being “always on” (Baron 2008), organizations have no such option. As “virtual persons” who never tire or never sleep, organizations also cannot lay claim to having personal lives that are separable from their professional ones.⁷

Discourse and organizations

This focus on discourse allows the arguments in this book to intersect with developments in the sociological and business study of organizations, which have moved from a largely positivist orientation towards one that is more discursive in nature (Albrow 1997: 17ff). Such a move is significant not only because it foregrounds the importance of organizational discourse. It also treats such discourse as an outcome of the activities of an independently existing entity (“the organization”), and appreciates that the discourse contributes to the very construction of the organization itself. I present below selected extracts, worth quoting despite their length, in order to demonstrate this important convergence between the focus on discourse in organizational studies, on the one hand, and the sociolinguistic emphasis on discourse, on the other.

Consider, for example, the points cogently articulated by Chia (2000: 513–14, italics in original; see also Cohen and Musson 2000: 33–4), who stresses the constitutive influence of discourse on how we understand organizations:

⁷ This is not the same as saying that organizational activities cannot be categorized as frontstage or backstage (Goffman 1959). Thus, see Richards (2010) and Wilson (2014).