
On the Language of Organization Theory

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Abstract

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Theories of organization rely upon verbs such as shape, determine, select, and choose. Although these verbs appear to depict processes of organization, instead they obscure organization processes behind empty and misbegotten abstractions. These verbs are shown to have the character of achievements; their grammatical form encompasses the very outcomes they purport to explain. The reasons why such verbs exist and are used so prevalently are explored and implications for revising the language of organization theory are considered.

Introduction

Scientific theories are made of words. These words have two masters. One is the requirement of system; the words must describe a coherent and internally consistent system in which conclusions follow from given laws or premises. The other is the requirement of empirical content; the words must refer to things that can be observed, or at least have implications that can be observed. As Quine (1981) has pointed out, many of the controversies in the philosophy of science can be seen as territorial disputes between these two masters.

A central problem for science, therefore, is to decide what to make of words that name objects or events that are unobserved or whose functioning in a theoretical system is unclear or unspecific. Such words betoken a netherworld between fact and fiction. Their grip on scientific imagination depends on the consequences of taking them for granted. For example, the words 'mass' and 'force' in classical mechanics, and 'firm' and 'competition' in modern economics, keep their hold by working behind the scenes in explanations of such things as planetary motion and the prices of goods.

Although it would seem best for scientists to avoid such words (as indeed the doctrine of operationism once advised), this is not always possible. All words are empirically and theoretically problematic to one degree or another. For there to be a theoretical system at all, room must be made for words that give up some observational content. As the modern realist philosophy of science has made clear, the fact that something is unobserved is no reason for saying that it is impossible, or that its supposition is meaningless (Harre 1970). According to Bhaskar (1978), scientific activity makes sense only on the assumption that

there is aboriginal reality that includes generative mechanisms or tendencies that are unobserved, and that may well be unobservable.

Bateson (1972) finds that science cannot do without words that name entities which have a general theoretical function, but for which there is not yet verification or explanation. He gives, as an example, the word 'instinct'. This word does not refer to a thing or process that can be observed. It is only an idea that behaviour has unlearned, species-specific determinants. According to Bateson, words such as this are explanatory principles. They exist as temporary and provisional agreements among scientists to accept certain ideas without question so that other ideas or problems can be investigated.

However, even allowing that words in scientific theories need not refer to observables, this in no way diminishes concerns about what they *do* refer to. Words that refer to unsubstantiated entities also can impede scientific progress. A danger is that the more these words are used, the more they may seem to refer to established entities, and not to hypothetical, provisionally agreed upon entities. When this happens, they no longer are given the scrutiny they deserve and scientific explanations can become bogged down with entities that do not have the stature and explanatory significance assumed for them. As Bhaskar (1978) has emphasized, scientific theories refer to the real world and must be evaluated (as far as possible) by their fidelity to it:

'... it is only if existential questions can be raised about the objects of scientific theory that the rationality of theory construction can be sustained. For without them science would remain, as in empiricism, a purely internal process . . .' (pp. 45–46)

Although scientific words need not refer to something observed, they must at least refer to *something*. Behind them must stand a definite object or event of some kind. Where this minimum criterion is not met, words denote non-existent (unreal) objects or events, which by virtue of being unobserved, cannot easily be disputed. These are words for science to avoid.

This paper is about the words used in theories of organization. It argues that the words commonly used to describe the process of organization (or 'organizing') do not and *could not* have the existential warrant supposed for them. These words do not explain how organization comes about, but instead mystify the process in a welter of misbegotten abstractions and unauthentic processes. By calling attention to these words, better theories of organization can be made.

The paper begins by reviewing the two dominant perspectives on the genesis of organization: one that attributes organization to environment; the other that attributes it to choices made by elite decision-makers. Both perspectives are found to rest on words having dubious predicates. Next, the theory of organizing proposed by Weick (1979) is examined. This theory is given special attention because it suggests how organization could be explained without these kinds of words while at the same time showing how easy it can be to slip back into using them. The paper ends by considering implications for

organization theory. We suggest why problems with words happen and what can be done to minimize these problems. It is emphasized that the problem of words is not 'mere semantics' (a misleading phrase if ever there was one). On the contrary, organization theory should make more of a place for critical linguistic analysis. Words are all we have to communicate understanding; getting them straight is what theory-making is all about.

Environment, Strategy and Organization

Organization and management theories mostly arrive at the problem of organization from the tradition of Parsonian structural-functionalism (Dow 1988). This tradition begins with the concept of *the organization* and conceptualizes organizing as the transformation of this entity by dynamics that fit or adapt the organization to its environment. This way of talking about organizing is rooted in the metaphor borrowed from 19th century biology of the equilibrium-seeking organism in an environment.

As Astley and Van de Ven (1983) have noted, a central debate in organization theory today focusses on whether changes in organization are due to environment or strategic choice. We call the first perspective *exogenesis* because it attributes change to the outside environment; either to definite causal forces (e.g., Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), or to the action of selection processes (e.g., Hannan and Freeman 1977). We call the second perspective *endogenesis* because it attributes change to actions and choices of managers inside the organization (e.g., Child 1972) and/or decision processes associated with these actions and choices (e.g., Bower 1972; Fredrickson 1986).

To date, the debate between these perspectives has proceeded largely as a contest of weaknesses. Child's case for strategic choice rests on the argument that environments do not and could not determine organization completely. Conversely, Hannan and Freeman's (1977) argument for environmental selection states that strategic choices do not matter very much because organizations are subject to strong inertial pressures which prevent them from changing. Most recently, this debate has quietened to a discussion of the conditions under which each idea best explains organization (see, e.g., Hambrick and Finkelstein, 1987; Hrebiniak and Joyce 1985; Romanelli and Tushman 1986; Singh, House and Tucker 1986).

The problem with both these perspectives is that they describe a world that does not bear close scrutiny. They speak of entities and organizing processes that can neither be observed nor even specified. When we look behind the words, we find nothing so concrete or definite as the words suggest. If it is asked *how* environments or managers determine organization, the answer usually given is that they 'select' or 'choose' one that is appropriate. However, to say that organization is 'selected' or 'chosen' only incorporates the fact to be explained in the verb used to do the explaining. The verbs 'to select' and 'to choose' do not refer to definite activities, but rather to consequences that

unspecified activities might have. They present an appearance of process that only seems to explain organization.

Ryle (1949: 151–152) identifies this problem as a confusion between task verbs and achievement verbs. Task verbs refer to real processes, activities or experiences. Achievement verbs, however, do not refer to any of these things, but rather to outcomes that processes can have. According to Ryle, achievement verbs 'do not stand for perplexingly undetectable actions or reactions, any more than "win" stands for a perplexingly undetectable bit of running, or "unlock" for an unreported bit of key turning' (p. 152). Running and key-turning are task verbs that refer to actual processes; winning and unlocking are achievement verbs that refer to outcomes that running and key-turning can have.

Ryle argues that the failure to notice that some verbs are achievement verbs while others are task verbs often leads to gratuitous puzzlement and 'mystery-mongering' theory (p. 151). A review of representative literature in both the exogenetic and endogenetic perspectives on organization shows how this problem is manifest and why it occurs.

Exogenesis: The Argument from Environment

The argument from environment consists of three basic ideas: (1) organization and environment are different and distinct things; (2) they are related by functional imperatives for 'fit' or 'accommodation'; and (3) their relationship is asymmetrical — environment affects organization more than organization affects environment (presumably because environment is larger and more resistant to influence). This argument is 'exogenetic' because it locates the cause of structure outside the organization, in environmental pressures and forces. It is the basis of such diverse theories as open-systems theory (Katz and Kahn 1966), contingency theory (Burns and Stalker 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Van de Ven and Drazin 1985), resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) and population ecology theory (Hannan and Freeman 1977, 1984; Aldrich 1979).

Distinguishing exogenetic theories are ideas about how environments determine organization. One is that environments create new organizational forms by prompting old ones to change — for example, by the force of new resource contingencies, new accountabilities, new regulations, or new product or process technologies. Astley and Van de Ven (1983) call this perspective the systems-structural view. A second idea is that environments select out organizations that do not fit the niche that they are occupying and select for competing organizational forms that are relatively better performers (Aldrich 1979). According to this perspective, new organization forms arise primarily from the birth of new variations of organization that are better competitors. Astley and Van de Ven (1983) call this perspective the natural selection view. Both perspectives are deterministic in orientation (Astley and Van de Ven

1983: 248–250) with the central difference being the level of analysis chosen by the researcher. The systems–structural view looks at the micro or organizational level while the natural selection view takes a population or community perspective.

Missing Process. These exogenetic perspectives do not, however, actually specify the processes by which environments influence organization. The words at the centre of systems–structural theories presume, but do not name, actions that environments take on organizations. Environments are said to determine or shape organizational forms (Mohr 1971; Van de Ven, Delbecq and Koenig 1976), usually by forcing managers to adapt to changing constraints or contingencies (Astley and Van de Ven 1983). Such words as determine, shape and adapt do not designate actual processes, as Pfeffer and Salancik (1978: 225–226) point out:

‘Much current literature about organization–environment relations does not hypothesize mechanisms of environmental effects. One can read studies about uncertainty and structure (e.g., Duncan 1972), competitiveness and structure (e.g., Pfeffer and Leblebici 1973), or change and structure (e.g., Lawrence and Lorsch 1967) without ever learning how these environmental dimensions produce effects on organizations. It is as if a Mr Environment came into the organization, giving orders to change organizational structures and activities.’

Attempts to supply the process of environmental influence typically involve further detailing of the linkage between environment and organization. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), for example, concentrate on processes of executive succession. They contend that environment influences organization via ‘three causal linkages that may lead from environmental factors to organizational characteristics’:

‘First, there is the link between the environment, a source of uncertainty and constraint, and the distribution of power and control within the organization. Second, there is the link between the distribution of power and control and the choices of executives and their tenure. Finally, there is the relationship between organizational administrators and the actions and structures of organizations.’ (p. 229)

The critical link in this argument is the first one, which alleges causal effects of environment on the distribution of power and control in the organization. However, this is no more of a description of process than the literature the authors initially criticized. The reader is told that sub-unit power in the organization is determined by the sub-unit’s ability to cope with critical problems and uncertainties facing the organization. The reader is told also that many problems and uncertainties are the product of the environment. What the reader is not told, however, is *exactly how* the environment produces these problems and uncertainties. Again there is no mechanism, no process; only a story that sounds like a process theory (see, Mohr 1982).

It is ironic that where Pfeffer and Salancik actually do describe process (the organizing of power), the environment functions not as a cause, but more

narrowly as a constraint on the course of an autonomous organizing process. In their own words: 'The importance of the environment is that it sets the conditions that provide for the organizing of power within organizations' (p. 232). This conclusion is opposed to their claim that the link between environment and organization is causal, and indeed, to their more general thesis that organizations are controlled by their environments.

Similar arguments apply to theories of organizing based on the concept of natural selection (Hannan and Freeman 1977). As in other exogenetic arguments, selection processes are proposed to serve functional imperatives of isomorphism: 'In each distinguishable environmental configuration one finds, in equilibrium, only that organizational form optimally adapted to the demands of the environment' (Hannan and Freeman 1977: 939). Once again, the environment is cast as the agent of change. The environment 'selects out' malformed organizations through the agency of its selection processes: 'From a population perspective, it is the environment that optimizes. Whether or not individual organizations are consciously adapting, the environment selects out optimal combinations of organizations' (Hannan and Freeman 1977: 939).

Hannan and Freeman (1977, 1984) describe selection processes in terms of four different mechanisms: competition, growth, selectability, and reproducibility. The environment 'selects out' organization forms which: (a) are unable to compete successfully, (b) are unable to grow to assume new forms, (c) occupy 'selectable' niches, or, (d) are insufficiently reliable and accountable to critical stakeholders to reproduce themselves. The most important of these mechanisms is competition, which they define explicitly as a 'mechanism producing isomorphism' (p. 940).

The major difficulty with the theory of selection is that the verb 'to select' is an achievement verb. It does not name a definite set of events or occurrences, but only the fact that some such set resulted in a change in the prevalence or prominence of organizational forms in a community. It encompasses *any* process leading to this achievement, and by so doing, effectively refers to none. To borrow an analogy from baseball, the concept of selection functions like the concept of 'hitting'. Hitting is not a process; but a way of referring to the fact that batting took place in a particular way. Similarly, selection is not a process; but a way of referring to the fact that unnamed processes developed in a particular way.

The problem is not simply that selection processes are unobserved, but that they are *unspecified*. Their content is always unidentified. This problem has been noted even in the case of Darwinian concepts of natural selection:

'... [with selection] you come to what is, in effect, a vacuous statement. Natural selection is that some things leave more offspring than others; and you ask, which leave more offspring than others; and it is those that leave more offspring; and there is nothing more to it than that. The whole guts of evolution — which is, how do you come to have horses and tigers and things — is outside the mathematical theory.' (Waddington, quoted in Moorhead and Kaplan 1967: 14)

Perhaps the surest affidavit to this problem is the fact that the mechanisms of selection remain inscrutable despite attempts to make them otherwise. All four of the mechanisms named by Hannan and Freeman (1977, 1984) are subject to the same criticisms as selection itself. To say that an organization competes successfully, or does not grow into a new form, or remains in an unselectable niche, or maintains its reproducibility, is to repeat in different words that it is not selected out. Once again no processes are specified, only facts about how unmentioned processes evolved. In general, the criteria for selection can be made arbitrarily precise — for example, the environment could select for low-cost producers, or organizations located in particular geographical regions, or organizations whose names begin with the letter 'q' — and still no process would be identified. This is a logical property of achievement verbs. The selection argument can be made more detailed, but it can never specify a process.

There is an important conceptual distinction between the fact that some types of organizations died out while others proliferated and a theory to explain this fact (Gould 1983). That some organizational forms have died out is incontrovertible. To the extent that we can trust the historical record, we have documented evidence of this in much the same way as the record of the evolution of biological species is provided in fossil records. But this is different from saying that a theory of selection has been empirically tested, or for that matter even logically developed. The concept of selection is not an adequate, testable theory of organizational process (see Delacroix and Carroll 1983). Selection processes cannot be responsible for the diversity of organizational forms because no specific processes as such ever could be proposed or tested.

Reasons for Difficulty. The reason why no process is named in exogenetic theories of organization is not simply because achievement verbs are used. More fundamentally it is because there is no process there to be named. Environment cannot explain organization because it is not the sort of thing that can be united with organization in a theory of process.

One difficulty is that environment is not a definite thing. The word has no specific referent; it stands for no particular thing or set of things, and has no definite form or extension. It is everything that is not the organization. Its meaning is given by its use in theory, where it functions as a kind of sensitizing concept. Environment is the idea that there is something outside the organization that somehow explains what is inside. As a point of logic, environment could not determine organization because it is defined by organization. By definition, there is no organizational environment *until* there is an organization to have it. This problem sometimes is obscured by arguments that environments determine organization by affecting the behaviour of organization members (e.g., through executive succession, or the distribution of power and control). This is misleading, for in this event there is no organization environment as such, only a multiplicity of environments, one for each organization member. These environments are unique and composed

mainly of other organization members. At this level, so-called 'environment effects' consist mainly of social interactions.

Exogenetic explanation is undermined further by the concept of organization, which also is not a definite thing. Actually, the word organization is used in two ways: as a name for the fact that people or actions are related in a pattern, *and* as a name for a thing that is acted upon by the environment or by strategic decision-makers. This second use is a hypostasization: it involves treating an entity that cannot be denoted as though it *could* be denoted. This problem stems from the fact that language reifies: the act of naming produces entities that are easily mistaken as material and do-to-able things.

The argument from environment rests on the fallacy of assuming that indefinite things can function as if they were definite things. This is a hazard of abstraction that Whitehead (1924) aptly named the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. Abstractions are mistakenly concrete when they are derived by means other than generalization from particulars. As used in exogenetic theory, neither organization nor environment are derived by generalization: organization being hypostasized, environment being defined negatively by subtraction of organization from everything else. Thus it is apparent why exogenetic theories of organization rely on achievement verbs such as selection, or similarly vacuous verbs such as shape, determine, or influence. This is because environment and organization are not the sorts of things that can interact with one another. The only way to unite them theoretically — to explain organization — is by imagining an occult process operating behind the scenes. Achievement verbs are ideal for this purpose because they appear to name processes, but without specifying their details.

Endogenesis: The Argument from Strategy

The argument from strategy has three parts: (1) managers make decisions about organization objectives and establish plans for realizing those objectives (Andrews 1971); (2) these decisions and plans promulgate definite organizational processes such as innovation, growth, divestiture, standardization, downsizing, market or product line expansion, or retrenchment; and (3) these processes lead to changes in organization form. This argument is 'endogenetic' because it locates the cause of structure inside the organization, in the choices made by key organization members. It is the basis for virtually every major theory of strategic management, including the theory of strategic choice (Child 1972), bounded-systems theory (Thompson 1967), upper-echelons theory (Hambrick and Mason, 1983), logical incrementalism (Lindblom 1959; Quinn 1980) and others (see, e.g., Andrews 1971; Chandler 1962; Miles and Snow 1978).

Two relationships link the parts of this argument. First, there is the link between the content of a strategy (e.g., constituent decisions, plans, goals and objectives) and the processes of its implementation and execution (e.g.,

growth, standardization, innovation). Second, there is the link between the implemented process and organization form. Through these two links, strategic choices are said to 'determine' (Chandler 1962: 383), 'shape' (Miles and Snow 1978: 7), 'marshal' (Quinn 1980: 7), or 'cause' (Child and Keisler 1981: 38) organization.

Missing Process. The endogenetic perspective no more identifies specific processes of organization than the exogenetic perspective. Strategic choices are said to bring about strategic actions (e.g., growth, innovation, or market expansion) and these actions are said to lead to changes in organizational form. However, no details are given about how these things happen.

Two representative attempts to supply the missing process are considered briefly: Child's (1972) theory of strategic choice, and Chandler's (1962) history of the multi-divisional organizational form. Child's (1972) theory was a response to the strong functional determinism of existing arguments from environment, technology and size. The problem with these arguments, wrote Child, is that they 'fail to give due attention to the agency of choice by whoever have the power to direct the organization' (p. 2). According to Child, these models overstate the determinism of factors of environment, technology and size and misrepresent the latitude and tendencies of decision-makers to make decisions about them — for example, to decide such things as what environments the organization will operate in, what clientele it will serve, what employees it will hire, what kinds of relations it will have with key stakeholders, what technologies it will employ, how it will interpret various constraints and opportunities, whether it will grow and how fast, and even how it will be designed. This indeterminacy of functional arguments of structure led Child (1972: 15) to conclude that:

'Strategic choice is the critical variable in a theory of organizations. Other variables which have often been regarded as independent determinants of organizational structure are, within this perspective, seen to be linked together as multiple points of reference for the process of strategic decision-making.'

Child is unequivocal about the need to incorporate the 'agency' of choice in organization theory. Unfortunately, he does not say what this agency is, or how it should be taken into account. Several processes are named, including: psychological and social processes of 'choice' (p. 2), 'securing cooperation' (p. 14), 'strategy formulation' (p. 15), and 'assessing constraints and opportunities against values' (p. 16). There is also an 'essentially political process in which constraints and opportunities are functions of the power exercised by decision-makers in the light of ideological values' (p. 16). None of these processes are described and, more important, no explanation is given of how these processes affect organization. Explanation begins and ends with the unilluminated claim that strategic choice is the agent of structural change.

A second example is Chandler's (1962) analysis of the complex relationship between strategy and structure. Chandler (1962: 383) summarizes this relationship as follows:

'The comparison of the experience of a sizeable sample of large industrial enterprises . . . emphasizes that a company's strategy in time determined its structure and that the common denominator of the structure and strategy has been the application of the enterprise's resources to market demand. Structure has been the design for integrating the enterprise's existing resources to current demand; strategy has been the plan for the allocation of resources to anticipated demand. The performance of these companies further suggests that a self-generating force for the growth of the industrial enterprise within a market economy . . . has been the drive to keep resources effectively employed. The same need has shaped the ways, particularly the structure, by which a firm has been managed.'

Chandler is often cited as support for the idea that strategy causes structure; and indeed, as revealing the process by which this occurs. Yet, his case studies of du Pont, G.M., Standard Oil, and Sears show the relationship between strategy and structure to be neither simple nor direct. Strategy comes off as a remote factor in the origins of structure, and not as a true cause. Structure develops from a complex matrix of unplanned stresses and strains caused by an essentially self-generated force for growth. This is shown in his discussion of the emergence of different kinds of administrative positions:

'Since each type of position handles a different range of administrative activities, each must have resulted from a different type of growth. Until the volume or technological complexity of an enterprise's economic activities had so grown as to demand an increasing division of labor within the firm, little time needed to be spent on administrative work. Then the resulting specialization required one or more of the firm's executives to concentrate on coordinating, appraising and planning these specialized activities. When the enterprise expanded geographically by setting up or acquiring facilities and personnel distant from its original location, it had to create an organization at a central headquarters to administer the units in the field. When it grew by moving into new functions, a central office came to administer the departments carrying on the different functions. . . . Finally, when an integrated enterprise became diversified through purchasing or creating new facilities and entered new lines of business, or when it expanded its several functional departments over a still larger geographical area, it fashioned a number of integrated divisional units administered by a general office.' (p. 15)

Even though structure may evolve by accretion of *ad hoc* responses to local stresses and strains, this does not deny Chandler's finding that executives do think about strategy, and that they do entertain ideas to grow and do contemplate and decide how growth should proceed. Nevertheless, it is difficult to separate these thoughts and ideas from the process of growth itself. Do they come before, after, or as part of this process? Indeed, it seems that it is only at critical junctures, when the intrinsic logic of change through growth falters, that inputs from elite decision-makers (e.g., Alfred Sloan at G.M.) make a difference. Such a juncture may be the quantum shift from a functional to divisional structure that Chandler describes. However, even on these occasions, it is unilluminating to say that these changes are caused by strategic choices; this obscures crucial details about events that led up to and suggested the change, as well as the details about how choices were brought into action.

Chandler's examples portray strategy, not as a cause, but as a kind of guiding principle or constraint on an otherwise autonomous, self-governed and self-organizing process.

In the endogenetic theories of both Child and Chandler, we again come to a word that does not refer to a unique and separately identifiable process. This is the verb 'to choose'. This word is synonymous with the verb 'to select' and it makes for similarly hollow explanations of organization. To say a choice has been made is not to speak of a process; but an achievement or outcome — namely, that one thing happened when others could have.

The argument that choosing is not a definite species of activity is brought into sharper focus by studies of strategic choice processes (e.g., Bower 1972; Fredrickson 1986; Lindblom 1959; Mintzberg and McHugh, 1985; Mintzberg, Raisinighani and Theoret 1976; Quinn 1980; Burgelman and Sayles 1986; Witte 1972). These studies join in demonstrating that the more closely one looks at these processes, the more difficult it becomes to identify any activity that can fairly be called 'choosing'. As decision activities go, 'choosing' proves curiously fugitive. Where it is identified at all, it is almost always alloyed with one or more other decision-related activities: e.g., implementing previous choices, establishing values and objectives, setting criteria for evaluation, weighting criteria, relating means to ends, searching for alternatives, assessing consequences of alternatives, evaluating alternatives, comparing alternatives, communicating data and analyses, integrating analyses and forming conclusions (see Lindblom 1959; Mintzberg et al. 1976; Witte 1972). Although it is often asserted that choosing is a definite process unto itself (e.g., Fredrickson 1986: 281), it is not often easy to tell where these other decisional activities leave off and choosing begins. One wonders if there is anything to it over and above these other activities.

It could be argued that the word choice does not have to refer to a single identifiable activity. The word would still be valid if it referred to a definite group of activities that produces choices. The problem, however, is that no such group can be identified. As soon as one tries to specify component activities (e.g., setting criteria, evaluating alternatives) one finds them to be as fugitive as 'choosing'. The act of evaluating alternatives cannot be distinguished unambiguously from the act of identifying alternatives, which cannot be distinguished from the act of establishing criteria for selecting alternatives, which cannot be separated from the act of selecting alternatives in the past, and so on. These activities shade imperceptibly into one another and are no more discernible than choosing.

The language of choice defines a kind of word game in which key terms have meaning only by reference to other key terms. Not one is defined ostensibly with reference to a particular action or event. Untethered from the actual, these words take on a life of their own. Their ambiguity fuels growing skepticism about the nature and functioning of strategic choice processes in organizations. Many argue that strategic choices are not 'made', but 'realized' by decision-makers afterwards. Behind Lindblom's concept of muddling

through, Mintzberg's concept of emergent strategy, and Quinn's concept of logical incrementalism, is an idea that there is not necessarily any choosing going on behind what we call 'choices'. This raises the nettlesome and as yet unanswered question of when real choosing occurs.

Despite our preemptions about them, if processes of choice cannot be demonstrated, then they cannot be demonstrated to cause organization. Obviously, field generals direct the movements of troops in battle, baseball managers direct the positioning and play of players, and maestros direct the play of orchestra members, and yet, when even these obvious cases are examined in detail, there is no basis for saying that choices cause organization. Indeed, all that can be observed are actions taken by the general, coach, or maestro which lead (or do not lead) to a complex and ramifying chain of actions and reactions among organization members. Structure emerges as the pattern of this welter of activity. This pattern (apart from its constituent parts) is not caused by the actions of the leader (and indeed could not be unless the pattern was somehow already built-into those actions), but is complexly determined by a host of exogenous factors, including the location and accessibility of organization members, their perceptions, and their dispositions to act. This does not mean that leaders' actions are irrelevant. They are akin to the opening moves of a chess game — crucial to the form the game takes, but not its cause and certainly not the sole determinant of its outcome.

To reiterate, the main difficulty with the word 'choice' is that it does not refer to a definite and separately identifiable process or activity. It is an achievement verb that refers only to the fact that one thing happened (a particular strategy was adopted, or a particular organization emerged) when other things were possible. It is a powerful and convenient figure of speech, not a description of process. Relying on this word obscures the actual goings-on between and among organization members.

Reasons for Difficulty. As in exogenetic theories, the reason why no process is named in endogenetic theories is because there is no process there to name. Once again, achievement verbs appear to solve a problem that cannot be solved. Élite choices cannot explain organization because they are not the sorts of things that can be brought together with organization in a theory of process.

As before, the reason has to do with the abstractions used. In addition to the difficulty with the concept of organization described earlier, there are difficulties also with the concepts of decision-making elite and strategic choice. The concept of a decision-making elite (the dominant coalition or upper echelon), presupposes that decision-making can be located in an individual or group of individuals. However, as Child (1972) acknowledges: 'The notion of a dominant coalition is advantageous in the way it highlights the immediate source of major structural variation in organizations, but it is an abstraction that could be misleading if not used cautiously'. Others argue that the concept is misleading (e.g., March and Olsen 1976; Sandelands and Stablein 1987). Although a decision-maker or decision-making elite may announce that a

'decision' has been made, the decision very likely was influenced by outside factors including prior actions, inputs from lower level participants, and flows of information and values throughout the organization. This raises the question of where strategy actually gets made, and where the boundaries of the dominant coalition begin and end.

The concept of a strategic choice is misleading in a different way. Common parlance notwithstanding, choices are not 'things' that actually can be made, passed along to others, or modified as required. To say someone has made a choice is to speak only figuratively of the fact that he/she did one thing when other things were possible. A choice is a state of affairs, not a physical entity or even a process (making a choice is neither like making a cake nor like making love). As such, it cannot meaningfully be said to determine anything. This much is obvious in that making choices is different from making them happen.

Both the concepts of elite decision-maker(s) and strategic choice pose a similar problem of abstraction, this time not of misplaced concreteness but of mistaken generality. Unlike true abstractions, these concepts do not reach beyond the particular. They are defined by and for a particular instance or occasion. The strategic elite makes strategy (by definition), and at the same time is made by strategy. It is defined only for the strategy made. By the same token, a choice leads to an action amidst alternatives (again, by definition), and at the same time is made by that fact. These concepts recall only a single occasion or instance, and consequently cannot be part of general explanatory laws.

Despite facing different problems of abstraction, endogenetic theories of organizing are forced to use achievement verbs such as 'choice' for essentially the same reason as exogenetic theories — namely, because they mix uncompanionable entities that cannot interact with one another. Strategic elites and strategic choices are not the sort of things that can determine organization. They can be united with organization only by occult processes operating behind the scenes.

Weick's Social Psychology of Organizing

Having seen how the two dominant theoretical approaches to organization are compromised by key words, it is useful to consider the alternative approach proposed by Weick (1979). This approach is of interest partly because it introduces words that promise a more secure theory of organizing, and partly because it shows how a promising theory can be undermined by words borrowed from the exogenetic and endogenetic approaches examined above. Weick's theory of organizing is an object lesson in how to go about building (and not building) a theory of organization.

Weick proposes that organizing is accomplished by processes that 'contain individual behaviors that are interlocked among two or more people' (p. 90). The unit of analysis in organizing is contingent response patterns. 'Organization' is equated with the concept of interlocked behaviours: 'The structure that

determines how an organization acts and how it appears is the same structure that is established by regular patterns of interlocked behaviors' (p. 90).

Weick departs from exogenetic and endogenetic arguments by claiming that organization is self-generating. Structure is not a response to environment, nor a product of design, but develops naturally as a manifestation of self-interested individual behaviour. This is the view of organizing as a social-psychological process. Complex social structure emerges from complex social behaviour.

To make his case in the most persuasive way possible, Weick shows how organization can arise spontaneously, even under the infertile circumstances of minimal social contact and an absence of shared goals. He shows not only that organization appears, but more importantly that it can reproduce itself and grow into even more elaborate structures. Writes Weick (1979: 109):

'While the minimal social situation, collective structure and mutual equivalence structures may seem bare, they are not barren. They are building blocks that can be aggregated into enormously complicated structures without the necessity of any single person knowing, understanding, or even visualizing that entire structure.'

Here Weick is talking about pure process. Organizing consists of individual actions that become interlocked in patterns called organizations. The process develops of its own accord and logic. There are no ghostly forces intruding from the environment, nor decision-making élites choosing designs. According to Weick, the process is self-organizing: 'The coordination is built into simple structures, the assemblage of which creates units more complex than anyone can comprehend' (p. 109). Everything is above board and can be observed.

However, after staking this claim on the territory of organizing, Weick abandons it by retreating to endogenetic and exogenetic arguments. The retreat begins with a detailing of how 'influential organization members' (i.e., dominant coalitions) follow certain rules when putting together behaviour patterns in the process of organizing. Sixteen such rules are presented, each prescribes a basis for 'selecting' behaviour patterns from among those available — e.g., 'select those cycles whose completion requires the least effort' 'select those cycles that have occurred most frequently in removing equivocality'. Organizing is once again choosing; and organization once again determined by the choices of key decision-makers.

The retreat from process continues with a description of organizing as natural selection. Organizing is analyzed into four component processes: (1) ecological variation provides raw materials for organizing; (2) enactment processes create a human reality that decision-makers can make decisions about; (3) selection processes 'impose structures on enacted equivocal displays in an attempt to reduce their equivocality'; and, (4) retentive processes store the products of organizing as structures and standardized procedures. The result, however, is not explication but mystification. Where there was one process there are now four, each named by an achievement verb that does not identify a unique,

separately identifiable process. The bogey of selection is joined with those of environmental variation, enactment and retention.

What has happened is that a true process description of behaviours of organization members is transformed into familiar and mistaken arguments from strategy and environment. Words designating definite behaviours are replaced by words designating indefinite processes. The result is a vengeance of achievement verbs, including 'choice', 'selection', 'variation', 'enactment' and 'retention'. Process language is crowded out by exo- and endo-genetic language.

It should be noted that others besides Weick have sought to describe processes of social organization, some with more success than others (e.g., Burgelman 1983; Mohr 1982; Pettigrew 1973). Burgelman, for example, describes the process of internal corporate venturing as a complex of interlocking behaviours, yet his theoretical model of the process names no behaviours, only achievement verbs (16 in all). By comparison, Pettigrew describes an essentially political process of organizational innovation and maintains throughout a focus on the actual behaviours of individuals. Although it can be debated whether this or that author succeeded or failed to describe this or that process, the stubborn fact remains that such descriptions succeed or fail according to their words.

Discussion

Despite the fact that words at their centre do not hold, theories of exo- and endo-genesis do not fall apart, but remain somehow compelling. To move successfully beyond these theories, it is necessary to understand how they take us in. What is it about them that is so beguiling? How can the language of organization theory be reformed to provide a more secure centre?

One reason why theories of exo- and endo-genesis are so convincing has to do with the facts they are enlisted to explain. The population ecologist asks why certain forms exist and not others; the strategist asks why one form is implemented and not another (e.g., divisional or functional). These questions practically beg for answers expressed in terms of achievement verbs such as selection or choice. It seems only natural to explain an achievement with an achievement verb.

However, interest in achievements opposes interest in process. Descriptions of process tell what happens, not why one thing happened as opposed to another. For example, a description of what people do in organizations can explain why a particular form occurred, but cannot explain why an alternative form did not occur. It cannot explain why the form is functional and not divisional, or mechanistic and not organic. With achievements one wants to know not just why something happened, but, in addition, why it was that thing and not another.

The broad acceptance of exogenetic and endogenetic arguments can be

explained in other ways as well. One that is not very satisfying is that these arguments are unfairly criticized and were never intended to explain organization. These arguments not only invoke a language of process and causality, but actually lay claim to being theories of process. Aldrich (1979: 26–27), for one, emphatically states: 'The population ecology model represents an attempt to explain the *process* underlying change [emphasis in original]'. Pfeffer and Salancik, Child, Chandler, and Weick, all specifically mention process as the interest and intent of their arguments.

A better explanation for the popularity of these arguments is that it is difficult to see that they are not about process. How, for example, could one 'see' that environments do not cause executive succession?; or 'see' that environments do not 'select out' unfit organizations?; or 'see' that the dominant coalition does not 'choose' organization? There is nothing in experience to deny these arguments, and there is at least circumstantial evidence (albeit misleading) to affirm them. Like ideas about the existence of ghosts or the truth of myths, ideas of environmental control or managerial prerogative are difficult demons to exorcise. With no hope of appeal to the facts (because there are no facts to test), their measure can be taken only by conceptual analysis.

Furthermore, these arguments are sustained by certain prejudices. One is for rationality. The idea that organizational forms are selected or chosen implies that they are rational, and not indeterminate nor left to chance. In the case of endogenous theories, there is also the prejudice to identify intelligent action with human intellect. Insofar as organizations are well-adapted to their environments, it must be because there are perspicacious élites operating behind the scenes to make it so. This is a mistake Ryle (1949) engagingly called the 'fallacy of the ghost in the machine'. Intelligent adaptation does not imply mental activity and can arise from unmindful processes. This is a powerful and affecting lesson of economics, computer science, and biology, all of which show that intelligent-looking action can emerge from the activities of markets, electrical circuits, and social organisms such as ants and termites.

Toward a Language of Process

Theories advance with advances in words and these advances come only when words are viewed critically in the light of experience or demands for logical system. Words that refer to objects or processes that cannot be observed or verified must be questioned to distinguish those that contribute to theoretical progress from those that impede theoretical progress. Toward this end, it has been shown in this paper that theories of organization are undermined by words that refer to unauthentic processes operating between uncompanionable objects. These words portray an unreal world where organizing appears to be explained, but is not.

It should be emphasized that words cannot be objected to solely on the grounds that they name entities or processes that cannot be observed. However, an objection must be raised to words that name no entity or process whatsoever.

Such words defy criticism and give rise to empty but indisputable explanations. As Barzun (1983: 63) reminds us, 'keeping hold of the concrete and particular is not to take sides against concepts and conceptions, ideas and general truths. On the contrary, it is to value these so much that one remembers to be fastidious in their use and demanding as to their quality'.

From time to time, words are championed in organization theory that speak concretely of things that can be seen and processes that can be watched. As discussed above, Weick identified promising candidates when speaking of the elementary units of behaviour called 'double interacts' and social psychological processes that link them in interlocking patterns. Allport (1962) offered a similar vocabulary in his analysis of group formation and agency. He proposed that collective structures develop from the interstructuring of behaviours in self-generating and self-reinforcing processes of 'structuration'. These processes are given by individuals acting in the presence of others under conditions of heightened probability of satisfactions through integrated or articulated behaviour. Similar views have been advanced by Blau (1964), Emery and Trist (1973), Homans (1961), and Olsen (1968).

Although there is no space here to recount these approaches or their vocabularies in detail, it is striking that all of them proceed from the principle of methodological individualism. They conceive of organization as an emergent property of *phenomenally given* actions of individuals (see Homans 1967). In this view, organization develops from interactions of individuals, much in the way that snowflakes or ice crystals develop from interactions of water molecules, or melodies develop from the interplay of musical notes. Organizational theory, from this standpoint, properly consists of words that describe individual actions and interactions.

This view makes bold the hazard to understanding posed by theories of exo- and endo-genesis. Dubious processes such as environmental selection and strategic choice juxtapose insecure abstractions such as organization, environment, and strategic elite to crowd-out crucial details about the behaviours actually involved in the process of organization. The basic concepts of exo- and endo-genesis do not represent these behaviours, nor are they developed from them. Indeed, they are not derived from anything that can be definitely identified or observed.

Implications for Research

There is finally the practical question of how processes of organization can best be studied. Nothing that has been said so far should be despairing, either about the value of past research, or about the prospects for future research. The problems of organization theory are not with empirical findings, but with how they are interpreted. Once the problems of explaining process are recognized, it is possible to see how future research can build upon past research to enlarge our understanding of organization.

To be sure, a concern for process calls attention to different variables and for

different kinds of measures and methods than have been used to date. In this connection, Pettigrew (1973) has spoken forcefully for methods of 'longitudinal processual analysis'. These methods substantially involve the researcher in the organization, to see and document the actions and interactions of members and to discern the patterns that emerge from them. These methods also call attention to history, because present behaviour patterns are predisposed by past behaviour patterns. Above all, these methods insist that process concepts be developed by generalization from observed behaviours, and not by inference from their consequences. The former produces task verbs and descriptions of process, whereas the latter produces only achievement verbs and an appearance of process.

Such a regime of research would by no means deny or repudiate previous research, but, instead, would build constructively upon it. There is nothing idle or useless about facts such as that mechanistic forms are associated with stable environments (Burns and Stalker 1961); that differentiated forms go with differentiated environments (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967); or that multidivisional forms occur together with strategies of diverse products or technologies (Chandler 1962). These are valuable clues about what kinds of behaviour patterns and processes to look for and about where to find them. As an obvious example, the relationship between organization and environmental stability reveals that interactions among organization members are substantially influenced by context. More pointedly, it suggests that members in touch with outside agents or constituencies (e.g., suppliers, customer, regulators) may be especially active in the network of organizational behaviour. Another way to view these facts is as facts to be explained by process theories of organization. Indeed, because they are among the most well-established facts, they are perhaps the best tests of these theories.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from this paper is that the problems of organization theory are essentially problems in the use of words. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, the reason we are confused by language is because we do not find the whole business of language confusing enough. 'A main source of our failure to understand', wrote Wittgenstein (1953: 47), 'is that we do not command a clear view of our words'. For him, the main task of philosophy was to 'battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by language'.

There is a need to see language as more of a problem in organization theory. This requires discipline — to look out for words with dubious denotations, to beware of achievement verbs that provide only an illusion of process, and to ask questions that lead theory and research towards process, instead of away from it. Required, above all, is the discipline to welcome the insult that comes of criticising one's own words. Science progresses by rejecting old words in favour

of new ones that work better. The history of science is full of rejection — of words once relied upon and now abandoned. This is what happened to the word 'phlogiston' in chemistry, the words 'caloric' and 'aether' in physics, and the word 'spirit' in psychology. It is a fate that sooner or later befalls every word in every theory. As this paper has argued, it is a fate deserved by certain key words in the theory of organization.

Note

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