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When the discourse of strategy meets the discourse of spirituality: a study of the recontextualization of strategy discourse in a Church organization

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Abstract

A well-established body of research in organizational studies shows how business-oriented strategy discourse has spread to different organizations and to society at large. Drawing insights from this research, we in this paper study how strategy discourse intertwines with the spiritual and religious discourse in a specific case of a Finnish Church organization. The interdiscursive analysis focuses on the Church's formal strategy text, employees' written reflections regarding the implementation of the strategy, and one-on-one leadership conversations where the manager-employee dyads discussed these texts. Thus, the data set makes a rare case of an intertextual chain of text and talk through which strategy discourse was recontextualized from the field of strategic management to a religious realm. Our analysis specifically highlights how both the organization of textual practices and the conversational practices – and their orchestration – contribute to the transfer and transformation, i.e., recontextualization of strategy discourse.

Keywords: recontextualization, strategy discourse, interdiscursivity, text, conversation

1. Introduction

Scholars investigating organizational strategies have pointed out that the practice of strategic management has colonized organizations and society at large. It is not only business organizations but also schools, kindergartens, cities, hospitals, churches, universities and various other organizations that produce and consume strategies, which originate from business and the discipline of strategic management (Greckhamer & Cilesiz; 2022; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Pälli, Vaara & Sorsa, 2009). As is the case in any type of colonization, colonization by strategy has repercussions for the colonized: scholars have shown how strategy restructures power relations in organizations, offers identities for the managers and the managed, or legitimates certain kinds of actions (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011). Thus, it can be said that strategy is "a performative discursive

device, having power effects of transforming, shaping, and disciplining the objects it is concerned with" (Kornberger, 2012).

However, while earlier studies of strategy discourse have suggested that the ability of strategy – i.e. the doctrine of strategic management and its practices – to colonize organizations is based on language and discourse, we know little about the situated practices of discourse through which strategy discourse is recontextualized into non-business organizations and their inherently not-for-profit discourses. To address this gap in knowledge, we will in this paper present an analysis of textual-discursive practices of strategy work, which consist of the organizational strategy text, organizational members' personal comments to the text, and manager-employee[1] one-on-one meaning-making discussions where the text's choices as well as the comments were discussed. Thus, our data set is unique in that it includes the whole chain of written and spoken interactions that together formed the essence of strategy implementation process in our case organization.

Methodologically, the paper follows the general lead of interdiscursive analysis (Bhatia, 2010; Fairclough, 2003), as we analyze how the discourse of strategy and the discourse of spiritual work in a Church organization are drawn upon and articulated together. More specifically, we investigate how certain interactional features of textual choices as well as the interactional practices within the conversation offer slots for conjoining the discourse of strategy with the spiritual discourse of the Church. At a broader level, our study aims to show how two different discourses – strategy discourse originating from managing business organizations and Christian religious discourse, which is built upon personal faith and communal spirituality – are interwoven and managed through textual and conversational practices.

Combined with the method of interdiscursive analysis, we specifically draw upon the theoretical concept of recontextualization, which Linell (1998: 144–145) defines as "the dynamic transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text-in-context to another". In organizations, the term 'recontextualization' basically refers to process through

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[1] We use the term 'manager' here as a general concept that describes the managerial position of these specific employees. Their job titles varied (e.g. The Head of Youth Services or The Dean of Parish) but we have chosen to call them 'managers', since their job responsibilities involved typical managerial duties such as budgeting and staff planning. Moreover, those called 'managers' in our study were – although not direct supervisors to 'employees' they discussed with – in upper-level positions in the Church organization's hierarchical structure.

which 'external' concepts, discourses or social practices are internalized within particular organizations (Fairclough, 2005).

Our paper adds to the earlier studies of recontextualization in professional, working life contexts by two main ways. First, our paper demonstrates how organizational and professional practices such as strategy development or strategy implementation can be understood and analyzed as linguistic recontextualization processes. Second, and relatedly, we develop an approach of analyzing recontextualization as an interconnected process of textual and conversational practice. In this approach, recontextualization takes place through interactional "slots" that the text, the practice of writing, and the practice of conversation offer. In other words, the slots are opened, first, by the organizational strategy text, second, by the organizational members' personal reflections of that text, and, third and finally, the conversations where those written comments are discussed between the manager and the employee. Importantly, these three practices affect each other: the text is interpreted in the organizational members' written statements of their own strategic goals, which in turn are negotiated and made meaning of in the one-on-one manager-employee conversations.

2. The recontextualization of strategy discourse

In the wake of the rise of different discursive and narrative approaches in organizational and management studies, there has been an increasing interest in studying strategy as a phenomenon inherently related to language and discourse (Vaara, 2010). In particular, studies adopting process or practice ontologies to strategy have advanced the view that language and discourse are constituting elements of daily practices of strategy and strategy making (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Thus, strategy is seen as contingent upon language (Lilley, 2001), it is an object that is socially constructed in social interaction (Mantere, 2013).

Following this general theoretical idea of social constructionism and discourse theory related to it, different empirical studies have highlighted some typical structures and recurring features of the language and discourse of strategy. These include, to name some, neoliberal capitalist ideology, masculinity, militarity, scienticity, manageriality, and spirituality – and, more specifically, research has identified "measurement" and "performance" as key features of strategy discourse (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013; Vaara, 2010). Additionally, studies have pinpointed general characteristics, genre features, of strategy texts such as formal strategic plans, showing that

3

predictability, future-orientedness, directiveness, and authoritativeness are the common core elements of these texts (Vaara et al., 2010).

Earlier studies have also drawn attention to the reciprocity of talk and text in strategy work. Pälli et al. (2009) find that conversations in strategy meetings are to a large extent about establishing and negotiating meanings of textual choices in both the existing strategy and the new strategy that is being planned in the meetings. Samra-Fredericks (2005) also elaborates on the power of strategy text, as she by analyzing a specific example of strategists' talk-in-interaction shows how a strategy text was deployed so that it limited the action possibilities of interactants. Based on their findings on the centrality of a written strategy document in the iterative talk to text process, Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) develop further the argument regarding the power of strategy texts as they, using a process model of communication, show how texts become more authoritative over time, hence inscribing power and social order in organizations. In a similar way, Aggerholm et al. (2012) show that ambiguities and multiple interpretations arise as strategy texts move through time and space across the different phases of strategizing, combining and interacting with strategy talk (different types of discussions and conversations over strategy).

More recently, scholars have furthered the idea of the importance of text-conversation dynamics in strategy work, as they have paid particular attention to how for example written texts – such as formal strategic plans – exert material agency in organizations (Penttilä, 2020; Pälli, 2018; Vásquez et al., 2018). Drawing on the socio-material approach on the entanglement of the social and the material, these studies have highlighted how strategy texts are – because of their material and semiotic affordances – performative in the sense that they actively take part in the activities of strategy work, as they, for instance, presentify matters of concern, authorize actions and viewpoints, and enable certain kinds of discourses in organizations.

To sum up, existing research has informed us in rich ways about strategy in organizations being a language-game of meaning-making, and – more specifically – research has indicated that strategy work in organizations systematically involves the recontextualization practice of stabilizing and destabilizing meanings through a dynamic reciprocal process between the semiotic entities of written texts and spoken interactions. Our paper adds to this existing research by viewing recontextualization of text and talk from the viewpoint of two

interestingly interwoven domains of life: strategic management and religious spirituality. By applying the theoretical concept of recontextualization in our case study in a religious organization we are able to show how the two elements actually interact at the micro-level of discourse, i.e. language-use, as organizational members make efforts of bringing these discourses in alignment with each other.

3. Data and methods

Our data come from a Finnish state Church organization of some 500 employees and 150 00 parish members. The Church was launching its new strategy and starting to implement it with the help of an interactive document and manager-employee conversations, called "leadership conversations" by the organization. The data consist the official strategy text, employees' written reflections with regard to the strategy, and video-recorded leadership conversations. The data were collected in late 2011 and early 2012 by the authors and a project researcher. . We video-recorded six conversations that lasted from one to two hours, amounting to nine hours of talk-in-interaction. In addition to the six page long strategy document, the textual data consist of the six employees' written reflections of their own strategic goals. Thus, the textual data comprised of some 2000 words long strategy document, and a total of 36 written reflections and statements (six from each employee), amounting to 24 pages of text (some 4500 words). As part of our field work, and in order to understand their strategy process and to gain relevant background and contextual information, we visited the organization and discussed their strategy process and, in particular, their experiences of one-on-one leadership conversations.

The interactive document first introduced the strategy of the organization. Following the typical format of a strategic plan (Pälli et al., 2009), the strategy included a general introduction with the titles 'Values', 'Vision' and 'Mission', and a section titled 'Strategic goals'. The goals included four 'guidelines', and, under each guideline a 'flagship project'. The guidelines expressed general strategic goals. The flagship projects, for their part, were more concrete. They described plans for developing particular activities in the organization.

The organizational strategic goals were followed, in the document, by a section titled 'Personal strategic goals'. with five subsections. The first four had the four strategic

guidelines as their titles. The fifth one was titled 'Goal 5', which made it possible for the participants to formulate an individualized goal for the particular employee in question.

Under each of the five strategic goals, there were three blank text fields where text could be entered. In the first field which was right under the strategic goal, the employees could reflect on the meaning of that particular strategic goal for their job. The second field was entitled 'Implementation of the goal. How do you plan to implement your goal?'and the third 'Agreements. What do we agree on the issue?'. The first two fields were to be prefilled by the employee before the leadership conversation. The manager had access to the text the employee had written.

A final section of the document was titled 'Open discussion'. This part had a blank text field for both the employee and the manager to enter any issues they wanted to be discussed in the conversation, with a text field for 'agreements' under each of them. During the conversations the managers and the employees went through the different sections of the document, the five strategic goals as well as the open discussion.

We were given access to the document and to the individual employees' pre-filled documents. All participants were asked a written consent for this. Based on the confidentiality agreement, we have anonymized the six video-recorded conversations. The confidentiality agreement covers also the details about the Church with an agreement of calling it a state church organization.

The method of the study was interdiscursive analysis through which we studied the recontextualization process, that is, the dynamic transfer-and-transformation between strategy discourse (originating from business and strategic management) and the spiritual and religious discourse of Church. We analyzed discourse at the micro-level of text and social interaction. At the level of text, we analyzed how the church organization's strategy text as well as the organizational members written reflections encoded, embedded, and mixed elements of strategy and spirituality and religiosity. By elements we mean both vocabulary and descriptions of strategic and religious activities (e.g. setting goals, measuring vs. praying, attending religious services). Correspondingly, we at the level of real-time social interaction analyzed how strategy and spirituality/religiosity became together articulated as part of talk-in-interaction. In addition, we paid attention to the structure of written text and conversations.

As for conversation, our analysis draws insights from conversation analysis, as we take into consideration the sequential structure of the conversations. (see e.g. Schegloff, 2007; Stivers, 2012). In particular, we look at the managers' initiatives and the employees' responses as adjacency pairs in which the initiative sets up specific expectations for the response. The textual analysis also paid attention to how the recontextualization was realized in different parts of the text. Through the structural analysis we very able to identify the slots the different parts of the written texts and the sequential structure of the conversations offered for the recontextualization of strategy in a religious context.

In transcribing the talk-in-interaction, we applied conversation analytic principles (see, for example, Hepburn & Bolden, 2012) and depicted, in addition to the words, the way the talk is delivered, e.g. pauses, repairs, restarts, and perturbations is the talk, as well as intonation and stress. We have not, however, marked embodied activities, as they did not turn out to be crucial for our analysis that centers on how the recontextualization of strategic and spiritual discourses takes place through interaction. In doing the analysis, we have relied on the original videos.

4. Findings

Next, we will present the findings from our qualitative analysis in three sections. First, we describe the textual and discursive features of the organizational strategic plan. In the second section, we analyze the organizational members' written comments to the plan. In the final analytical section, we offer two examples from the conversations. Through the two examples we illustrate how sequential structure is crucial for the conversational realizations of recontextualization. The examples from the participants' written text entries as well as the examples of the stretches of conversations we analyze in this paper are representative of typical recontextualization patterns in the data. They exemplify recurrent ways that spiritual discourse and the discourse of strategy, on the one hand, are intertwined, and on the other hand, may collide, during the recontextualization process. Figure 1 presents a visualization of the main findings from our analysis.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

4.1. Organizational strategy plan as the nexus of the discourses of strategy and religious spirituality

We will first look at how the formal strategy text itself – and different parts of the text in particular – offer different possibilities for the use of religious and strategic discourse. First off, we can notice that the general structure of the text follows the genre of formal strategic plans, and it consists of the canonical parts of any formal strategic plan document (Pälli et al., 2009). The text is divided into two main sections: the first section describes the values, vision and mission of the organization, and the second section brings up the strategic goals, first as general guidelines, then as more concrete 'flagship projects' which 'clarify' the guidelines. As a general observation, religious language fits best in the first section – consisting of values, vision, and mission. The text in this part is laden with religious expressions and statements of faith, underscoring the confessionality of the organization's work. An important linguistic feature in the first section is also the abundant use of the first person plural form, which combines with sentences expressing moral conviction. For example, the mission statement and described values are totally consonant with religious language (see Examples 1 and 2). As in all examples, the original text in Finnish is presented first, followed by the English translation.

Example 1.

> **Missio**
>
> *Tehtävämme on lähetyskäskyn mukaisesti elää ja toimia lähellä armollista Jumalaa, lähimmäistä palvellen ja luomakuntaa varjellen.*

> **Mission**
>
> Following the Great Commission, our mission is to live and act near to the merciful God, serving our fellows and protecting the creation.

Example 2.

> ***Arvot***
> * *Pyhän kunnioitus*
> * *Kunnioitamme pyhää kolmiyhteistä Jumalaa*
> * *Tunnustamme Jeesuksen Kristuksen ainutlaatuisuuden*
> * *Näemme Jumalan kuvan ihmisessä ja ihmisen syyllisyyden*
> * *Tunnistamme pyhyyden kaipauksen muissa uskonnoissa*

> **Values**
> * Respecting the Holy
> * We respect the holy trinity of God

- We confess the uniqueness of Jesus Christ
- We see the image of God in the human being and the sinfulness of the human being
- We recognize the longing for holiness in other religions

Clearly, the examples above present typical features of spiritual discourse, which is salient in the vocabulary and concepts from Christian religious discourse, such as 'the Great Commission', 'the merciful God', 'the creation', 'the Holy', 'the holy trinity of God', 'confess, or 'the sinfulness'. Besides vocabulary, the repeated 'we' followed by verb ('we respect…', 'we confess…')[2] echoes the format of a religious creed, a jointly expressed statement of belief. In conclusion, we can see that the general part of the text – consisting of the values, mission and vision – easily imbues spiritual language. In other words, the general section of strategy offers a convenient "slot" for the interlinkage of strategy and religion. However, it is important to note that this is about recontextualization in the sense that religious discourse is now inside the business-originated discourse of strategy, given that these religious statements are indeed a part of and are read in the context of a formal strategy plan.

In the next section of strategy text, the strategic goals and guidelines section, the tone of voice changes clearly. Features of spiritual language and rhetoric can still be noticed in the text, but as the examples 3 and 4 suggest, they are largely displaced by the technical-rational language of strategy. The text provides "rational" arguments by naming for example concrete critical success factors and performance indicators. Also, it makes use of "scientific" concepts and approaches such as 'process thinking' in the following example. Note too how the context of the religious organization (here one of its core functions, 'the Mass') meets the context of strategy and its typical requirements of measurability and the concrete means of indicating performance (development on the basis of participants' feedback).

Example 3.

Messujen kohdentamisessa otetaan huomioon prosessiajattelu, jossa käydään perusteellisesti läpi yksittäisen messun osallistujan kokemus. Messua kehitetään osallistujilta saadun palautteen pohjalta.

In targeting the Masses, process thinking is taken into account, where the individual participant's experience is thoroughly examined. The Mass is developed on the basis of the participants' feedback.

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[2] In Finnish, the first person plural can be agglutinated to the main body of the word, as is the case here.

Also, the text uses concepts and ideas familiar from popular business discourse. In the following example, the concept of 'brand' is brought up and recontextualized in the context of congregational work. Other than 'brand', the text passage here relies on concepts such as 'image', 'flagship project', and 'transferable skills'. Interestingly, these typical business concepts – familiar from strategy texts too (Pälli et al., 2009; Jalonen et al., 2018) – are, on the face of it, easily fit into the context of work in Church. While the recontextualization of specific concepts may be regarded as an example of intertextuality, there is also an obvious level of interdiscursivity at play here: the assertive and explanatory statements (regarding the goal of the brand factory project and the action points related to the project) reproduce the discourse of strategy by recontextualizing ideas related to "improving" and "increasing".

Example 4.

> *Brändiтakomo-kärkihankkeen tavoitteena on parantaa mielikuvia kirkosta ja sen toiminnasta sekä jalostaa toimintaa helposti ymmärrettäviksi tutuiksi kokonaisuuksiksi eli brändeiksi. Kärkihankkeessa tuotetaan seurakunnallisia brändejä, niihin liittyviä työkaluja sekä lisätään henkilökunnan ja vapaaehtoisten valmiuksia jatkuvaan brändien työstämiseen.*

> The goal of the brand factory flagship project is to improve the images related to church and its activities and to refine the action into easily understandable and familiar entities, i.e. brands. In the flagship project, congregational brands and tools related to them are produced, and transferable skills of the personnel and the volunteers to continuous work on branding are increased.

While there are a few first person plural forms in the strategic goals and guidelines sections, the text is, as the examples above indicate, characteristically impersonal in nature. To a large degree, it is about people, but instead of people, e.g. processes, projects, or activities are foregrounded. What is interesting is that after this "impersonal section" which speaks the language of strategy in the sense of building on the technical-rational aspect of strategy discourse, the document continues by urging the employees to comment on the strategic goals and guidelines in terms of their own work in the section called 'personal strategic goals'. As we will next highlight, this section – and the writing practice associated with it – calls for active recontextualization between spiritual and strategy discourse.

4.2. Strategy and spirituality in written documentation of personal strategic goals

When focusing on the written documentations concerning personal strategic goals, we found that these entries very recognizably inscribed elements from both strategy and spiritual discourse. In example 5, the documented entry is a reflection to a strategic guideline "We

commit ourselves to supporting the birth of faith and growing in it." As in all examples below, we reproduce the lay-out and functional design of the original form. The bolded sentences were imprinted in the text documents, and the employees wrote their entries to blank texts fields below the imprinted texts.

Example 5.

Sitoudumme tukemaan uskon syntymistä ja siinä kasvamista

Vien asian yksikköni strategian päivityspalaveriin ja pohdimme yhdessä, miten sen teemme. Pidän aktiivisena vuoden tavoitteen joka oli "Nuoret Kristukselle uskonsuhdetta vahvistamalla". Pidän huolta oman henkilökohtaisen uskonsuhteeni tuoreudesta osallistumalla aktiivisti seurakunnan toimintaan ja pidän myös yllä yksikköni hartaustoimintaa.

We commit ourselves to supporting the birth of faith and growing in it

I will take this issue to the strategy update meeting of our unit, and we will together ponder on the question how we'd go about it. I'll keep this year's goal, which was "Young people to Christ by strengthening the faith relationship", active. I take care of the freshness of my own faith relationship by participating actively in the activities of the congregation and I continue to maintain the prayers activity in my unit.

In example 5, the text entry includes elements with which the employee shows her or his expertise regarding the strategy process (e.g. the expression 'strategy update meeting'). Yet, traditional spiritual discourse is used as well (e.g. 'freshness of my personal faith relationship'). Highly importantly in terms of recontextualization, the religious and spiritual claims and descriptions are brought into the context of strategy in that they are described as strategic goals.

Similar pattern can be seen in example 6, where the employee's entry concerns implementation, as she produces the answer to the text field under the text form's question "How do you plan to implement your goal?"

Example 6.

Miten aiot toteuttaa tavoitteesi?

Varaan päivittäin aikaa henkilökohtaiseen hiljentymiseen, osallistun säännöllisesti raamattupiirimme kokoontumisiin + messuun; mikäIi en ole fyysisesti mukana messussa, kuuntelen sen radiosta.

Keskustelemme toiminnan suunnitteluprosessin kuluessa touko-elokuussa tästä strategisesta suuntaviivasta koko työyhteisömme kesken.

How do you plan to implement your goal?

I set aside time for personal mindfulness every day, I participate regularly in our Bible study sessions + the Mass; in case I'm not physically present in the Mass, I'll listen to it on the radio.

We discuss this strategic guideline in our whole work community during the action planning process in May-August.

On the one hand, strategy discourse is present in the expressions 'strategic guideline' and 'action planning process', and the employee shows her knowledge about strategy work in organization (discussing the strategic guideline in whole work community during the action planning process). On the other hand, however, the religious deeds that build on personal faith and spirituality are transferred to the context of strategy discourse, as they (personal mindfulness, participating regularly in the Bible study sessions) are produced as answers regarding the implementation of the goal. Interestingly, the context of strategy affects these goals also in that they follow the strategy discourse's general prerequisite of measurability and performance. Thus, we can conclude that the recontextualization pattern goes two ways: the generic requirements of strategy (there has to be goals and the goals should be measurable and performance oriented) set the context what the individual employee can say and how she can form her goals, but as the recontextualization is a two-way street, spiritual and religious claims and ideas become conjoined with and for their part affect the technical-rational ideas of strategy.

There is one additional, yet important inference about employees documenting, writing down, their own strategic goals. This has to with the two kinds of slots offered by two different sections in the documentation form. Basically in both sections, the reflection section and the implementation section, the employees document their ideas about how they see the guidelines they are to reflect on in terms of their own work, and thus even the reflection section implicitly embeds one key element in the body of strategy discourse, that of strategy execution having concrete and measurable performance indicators. However, this ideal is far more salient in the employees' documentations in the entry field concerning implementation (the question in the document being "How are you going to accomplish your goal?"). As can be seen in the previous example (6), indicating performance and measurability are accomplished through giving specific timeframes and regularity to actions ("I participate regularly in our Bible study sessions", "We discuss this strategic guideline … during the action planning process in May-August").

We highlight this pattern of discourse with still one more example, which is an employee's reflection that concerns the strategic guideline "We reach and we influence". Note how the employee continues in the implementation section by changing his style. While his text entry in the reflection section is quite noticeably a description with only implicit action points, in the implementation section he quite clearly changes his style by giving concrete examples and action points (e.g. 'walking around', supervisor being present in meeting'). Note also how the use of list form creates an organized action-oriented frame for this entry:

Example 7.

Tavoitamme ja vaikutamme

Olemme valmiita kaikenlaiseen yhteistyöhön terveydenhuollon kanssa. Olemme myös herkkiä kuulemaan seurakuntien yhteistyökumppanien kysymyksiä. Olemme tiedotusvälineiden suhteen avoimia ja aktiivisia.

Kuinka aiot toteuttaa tavoitteesi?

1. Toteutan aktiivisuutta kulkemalla toimintayhteisöissäni valmiina keskusteluun ja muuhun vaikuttamiseen.

2. Toiminta on kokoaikaista.

3. Sairaalasielunhoito on esillä tiedotusvälineissä ja kaikissa yhteyksissä varteenotettava partneri.

4. Viestinnän yksikkö ja oma esimieheni voisivat olla läsnä tapaamisissamme painottamassa tällaisen työskentelyn merkitystä.

We reach and we influence

We are ready for any kind of co-operation with the health care sector. Also, we are sensitive to hear questions from the parishes' partners. We are open and active as regards the public media

How do you plan to implement your goal?

1. I will accomplish activity by walking around and being ready for conversation and other types of influencing in my community of action.

2. The action is full-time activity.

3. Pastoral care is present in media and a noteworthy candidate for any partnerships.

4. The communications unit and my own supervisor could be present in our meetings for emphasizing the significance of working this way.

Overall, we can conclude that the implementation section, even more clearly than just reflecting on the guideline, facilitates the conjoining of strategy discourse and the spiritual discourse inherent to organizational members' work. What can be noticed is that the sections

offer different slots for recontextualization: in particular, the slot offered by implementation text field requires the employees to describe their work so that it consists of concrete action points and measurable activities. At the intertextual level, this turns to writing in a certain way and in a certain form (using e.g. lists), and the written entries again form part in the intertextual chain, affecting the subsequent interactions. We next focus on these face-to-face interactions in order to show how recontextualization of strategy is accomplished through conversational practices around the strategy and the employees' written entries. This last part of analysis shows how the manager and the employee conversationally negotiate how the relationship between strategic and spiritual discourse should be understood.

4.3. Connecting spirituality to strategy in leadership conversations

In the leadership conversations, the strategy is recontextualized again as part of face-to-face interaction. While other topics may also be discussed, the interaction in the conversations mostly circulates around the responses the employees have written while prefilling the document. In this section, we will concentrate on how that discussion about the employees' entries is realized and how the discourses of spirituality and strategy are drawn on.

The manager directs the leadership conversations. Our analysis reveals that he or she offers the employee two kinds of slots for discussing the text in the document. First, the managers may ask the employees to reflect on and clarify what they have written. Secondly, they suggest modifications in the text. These two types of initiatives project very different responses from the employees. While the requests for reflection are quite open-ended and project long elaborations by the employees, the suggestions are more focused and, importantly, they challenge something in what the employees have written. Also, the suggestions seem to be based on the manager's understanding of what strategic discourse should be like. In the following, we will give a typical example of both types, in order to illuminate the central differences between them, with regard to recontextualization of strategic discourse.

The following (example 8) is an example of a request for reflection and an answer to such a request. The employee's entry in the form is shown in the box before the extract from the conversation. In the transcripts, the manager is marked as M and the employee as E.

Example 8.

Seurakuntien lapsityön toteuttama kaste- ja ehtoolliskasvatus tähtää uskon syntymiseen ja siinä

kasvamiseen.

Huolehdin

1) oman hengellisen elämäni hoidosta

2) siitä että lapsityöntekijöiden hengellistä elämää ruokitaan myös työaikana

---

The baptism and communion education carried out by the child service work of the parishes

aims toward the birth of faith and growing in it

I will take care

1) of the nurture of my own spiritual life.

2) that the spiritual life of the child service workers will be nourished also in their working

   hours.

```
01  M:   .thh (.) tota:, (2.5) tästä varmaa (.)
         .thh (.) uhm:, (2.5) from here on I guess (.)

02       kysymys kerrallaan. (0.6) tota (.) sä oot tähän
         a question at a time. (0.6) uhm (.) you have here

03       (.) sitoudumme tukemaan uskon
         (.) we commit ourselves to supporting the birth

04       syntymistä ja siinä kasvamista, (3.0) mt nii, (.)
         of faith and growing in it, (3.0) mt so, (.)

05       mites (.) kommentoit kirjottamaas.
         how (.) do you comment on what you've written.

06 E:    hh joo. (0.6) no mä koen että tää on ihan
         hh yeah. (0.6) well I feel that this is precisely

07       meiän perustyötä. Että tähän mä uskon
         our day-to-day work. With regard to this I believe

08       että joka ikisen lapsityön (1.0) tekijän (0.7) on
         that every child service (1.0) worker (0.7) has a

09       mahdollisuus (0.5) löytää omaa (1.0) tavotetta
         possibility (0.5) to find their own (1.0) goals

10       työlleen. (0.2) koska jos ajatellaan
         for their work. (0.2) because if we think about
```

15

```
11      lapsi- ja perhetyötä seurakunnassa ni, .hhhh jos ei
        child and family work in the church, .hhhh if it

12      se oo sitä että se tähtää uskon syntymiseen
        isn't so that it aims towards the birth of faith

13      ja siinä kasvamiseen ni sit se o↑n ihan väärällä
        and growing in it then it ha↑s a totally wrong

14      pohjalla. (0.6) et mä koen että niinku tää (.)
        basis. (0.6) so I feel that like this

15      meidän työ on (.) juuri tätä. (1.1) mt .hh
        work of ours is (.) precisely this. (1.1) mt .hh

16      ja tässä mä koen justiin että (.) et mun tehtäväni
        and here I feel exactly that (.) that my task

17      on kahdenta- (.)-tahonen. (1.7) pitää (.) ↑itteni
        is twofo- (.) -fold. (1.7) to keep (.) ↑myself

18      (0.7) hengissä (.) hengellisesti ja, saada
        (0.7) alive (.) spiritually and, to get

19      ravintoo, (0.8) mutta myös (0.2) olla (1.4)
        nourishment, (0.8) but also (0.2) to be there (1.4)

20      antamassa sitä niitä (0.3) pohjia, (0.8) öö
        to give that those (0.3) foundations, (0.8) er

21      lastenohjaajille,=sekä sisällöllisiä (.)
        to children's instructors,=both substantive (.)

22      teologisia (.) dogmaattisia (0.6) #öö# (0.9) meidän
        theological (.) dogmatic (0.6) #er# (0.9) things

23      (.) arvoihin liittyviä juttuja, (1.5) että myös
        that have to do with our (.) values, (1.5) and also

24      (0.3) öö tätä tämmöst pedagogista puolta jos mä
        (0.3) er this kind of pedagogical side if i

25      ajattelen näitä lattiakuvia,
        think about these floor pictures,
```

In the beginning of the extract (lines 1–2) the manager suggests that they start going through the items in the form. After that he makes a request for reflection (lines 2–5). There are some

self-repairs in the request, but he ends up making a very open request for the employee to 'comment' on her written entry.

If we compare the employee's answer to the written entry, we can quickly see that it is much longer. The employee thus elaborates on her entry at length. In the answer, we can find three kinds of modifications. First of all, she gives additional details on what she has written. For example, while in the written entry she only promises that she will take care of 'nourishment' of the workers' 'spiritual life', in her reflection she specifies this through detailing five aspects of this nourishment: 'substantive', 'theological', 'dogmatic', 'things that have to do with our values', and 'pedagogical' (lines 21–24).

Secondly, there are aspects in her answer that are argumentative. In this respect, the first part of the answer (lines 6–15) is especially illuminating. In the written entry (lines 1–3) she states as a matter of fact that the work in her sector in effect realizes the strategic guideline. In her answer, she produces a more evaluative version: she constructs a hypothetical situation where the strategic guideline is not followed and gives a strongly expressed negative evaluation of this hypothetical scenario (lines 11–14). Also, she explicates twice that the strategic guideline can be more or less equated with what the workers in her sector are doing (lines 6–7, 14–15). Thus, she can be seen as defending her entry. In particular, she provides accounts for just stating that they are following the guideline, without specifying how that is done: if their 'day-to-day' work practically epitomizes the guideline, no specifications are needed.

Thirdly, in her elaboration, she uses more colloquial language which may make the descriptions sound more personal and dramatic. For example, instead of talking about 'the nurture of my own spiritual life' (line 5) as she does in the written version, she uses the metaphor of keeping herself 'alive spiritually' (lines 17–18).

If we think about the employee's elaboration of her written entry from the standpoint of strategy and religious discourse, we can note that she seems to move back and forth between the two. For example, in dramatizing her plans of personal religiosity she draws on religious metaphors. Yet, she frames her answer in the beginning through the strategic ideal of finding personal 'goals' (line 9) and in specifying the kinds of 'nourishment' she is going to give to the workers she does the kind of categorizing needed in strategizing, specifying her action plan for reaching the strategic goals. Thus, we can see that she produces heterogeneous

discourse where religious language is, on the surface, quite seamlessly interspersed with the language of strategy, even to the point that they are difficult to separate. This does not however, mean that the talk would fully follow the prototypical requirements of strategy discourse. For example, as the employee is essentially saying that the current practices of her team already align with the strategy, her talk is not particularly future-oriented. Rather, it implies that the strategy is irrelevant as no changes are needed in order to meet the strategic goals. Thus, we can say that the impression that spiritual and strategic language are seamlessly brought together is contingent on the manager not challenging the employee in any way.

In the cases where the managers suggest modifications to employees' entries, the relationship between religious and strategic discourse may be quite different. This sequential pattern involves a challenge by the manager. The projected response to such a suggestion is either acceptance or rejection, with acceptance as the preferred option (see e.g., Houtkoop, 1987; Stevanovic, 2012). In some cases, the employees indeed accept the suggestions. The suggestions can, however, also be rejected. In these (fairly rare) cases we can see an orientation to a discrepancy between strategic and religious discourse. As mentioned above, the suggestions are based on the manager's understanding of proper strategic language. In particular, two kinds of suggestions are made. Firstly, the manager may suggest that the employee should use 'active language' to describe her goals, which could mean, for example omitting words like *pyrkiä* 'try'. These suggestions thus aim towards reinforcing the goal-centeredness of the language used. Secondly, the manager may suggest that the employee should find ways to 'measure' her success in attaining her goals which points toward the strategic ideal of 'measurability' Thus, she works towards transforming the document as a strategy document. When the suggestion concerns an entry that uses religious language, it may lead to a collision between the discourses of strategy and religion. In the following, we will show an illuminating example of such a collision.

Example 9.

> *oman spiritualiteetin hoito erilaisin keinoin*
> *lastenohjaajien empaattinen kohtaaminen ja kuuleminen ja hyvän työskentelyn takaaminen*
> *yksilöt huomioiden*

01 M: joo mutta jos ajatellaan sitä (0.7) et miten (.)
          yeah but if we think about (0.7) how (.)

02   mitä pyrit tekemään, (.) jotta tämä (0.5) öö
          what you try to do, (.) in order for this (0.5) er

03   tavote toteutus, .h ni onko täälä (0.2)
          goal to be fulfilled, .h are there (0.2)

04   spiritualiteetin hoidossa ja, (.) näissä
          in taking care of your spirituality and, (.) these

05   työskentely- (0.8) hyvän työskentelyn
          working cond- (0.8) about securing good

06   takaa>misest jotai semmost< .hh löytyykö
          working >conditions something< .hh can you find

07   sieltä mitään m- millä voi mitata sitten että,
          anything there w- with which you can then measure,

08   jos sä tällä tavalla toimit, .h ni tämä (1.2) ö
          if you act in this way, then this (1.2) er

09   työllesi asettama tavote
          goal that you have set for your work

10   toteutuu.
          will be fulfilled.

11 E: .hh niin no jos mä aattelen tommosta oma spiru-
          .hh well if I think about such nourishing my own

12   (.) spiritualiteetin hoitoa, .hh ni (0.3) mää en
          spiru- (.) spirituality, .hh then (0.3) I can't

13   (.) mulle ei usko (.) joka lähtee siis
          (.) for me faith (.) which in this work

14   tässä työssä siitä mun omasta elämästä ja siitä mun
          derives from my own life and my

15   omasta vakaumuksesta ja arvopohjasta,=.hhh ni (.)

```
          own conviction and value base,=.hhh (.)

16        siitä tulee liian kaavamaista jos mä nyt laita
          it will become too formalistic if I now put

17        että mä n↑y käyn joka sunnuntai ja,=.hh se ei sovi
          that I d↑o go every Sunday and,=.hh it doesn't fit

18        mun ajatt[eluun.
          my thinking

19 M:              [mm,

20 M:     m[m,

21 E:      [se ei kerta ka[ikkiaan sovi että, .hhh sillon mää
           [it simply doesn't fit, .hhh then I

22 M:                     [mm,

23 E:     en oo rehellin[en?
          am not honest?

24 M:                   [°joo°
                         yeah

25 E:     ja [mä en oo sen takana, (.) tässä kohdassa mä en
          and I am not behind it, (.) for this item I can't

26 M:        [°joo°
             yeah

27 E:     pysty mittari[a,
          give a performance indicator,

28 M:                  [mm,
```

In her suggestion (lines 1–10), the manager takes up two issues, 'taking care of spirituality' and 'securing good working conditions'. In her entry to the implementation section of the document, the employee has written about these issues. However, her entry approaches the issue in a quite general way: e.g. she plans to take care of her spirituality 'with different methods'.

The manager suggests that the employee should try to find ways of measuring her success in attaining the goals (lines 6–10). The suggestion is designed in a cautious way, as a polar question about whether or not such performance indicators can be found. Thus, she leaves

open the possibility that they cannot. Also, on line 6, there is a self-repair through which the pronoun *jotain* 'something' is changed into *mitään* 'anything', thus displaying a lower expectation that indicators can be found.

In her response (lines 11–27), the employee rejects the suggestion. The rejection is designed in an intriguing way. In parts of it, the employee's disagreement is expressed quite strongly, e.g. *se ei kerta kaikkiaan sovi* 'it simply doesn't fit'. At the same time, it includes typical markers of a dispreferred response (see, Pomerantz & Heritage, 2012): In the beginning, the rejection is limited to concern just one of the two topics they are discussing, that of 'spirituality' (line 11–12). There are several repairs and restarts in the response (e.g. lines 12–13, 15, 17). There is a lengthy account of why she must reject the suggestion (lines 13–25). Through these dispreference markers the employee displays an awareness of the expectation for an affirmative response to the suggestion.

We can also look at the account itself. Following Antaki (1994, p. 130–132), we pay specific attention to the organization of what he calls "explanatory discourse". First, it is important that the account comes as a parenthesis. On line 12 (*mää en* 'I can't') the employee is already going towards the rejection that she then produces on line 25. Thus, through inserting it as a parenthesis in the middle of the rejection, she implies that the account is needed in order to understand the rejection (on parentheses in conversation, see Duvallon & Routarinne, 2005). Secondly, in the account she juxtaposes spiritual and strategic discourse. She describes her faith as something that has to do with 'conviction' and 'value base' (line 15), while the requirements of strategy, namely setting performance indicators, would lead to a 'formalistic' (line 16) way of thinking that would be incompatible with the ethos of personal religious conviction. Thus, in the employee's response there is a strong sense that because of her religious conviction she must reject the proposal, notwithstanding her awareness of the requirements of the strategy discourse and the interactional context in which an acceptance would be preferred.

In sum, the central findings from our analysis show that the managers' conversational practices have a profound effect on how strategic and spiritual discourse come to be intertwined during the leadership conversations. If they ask the employees to reflect on their written entries in an open way, the employees usually find a way to blend strategic and spiritual talk harmoniously, and their possible resistance to aspects of strategy discourse

remain implicit. Because of this, explicit clashes between the two discourses are quite rare. If, however, they suggest modifications to the employees' entries, an explicit clash may emerge between the two types of discourse. This is because the request for a modification offers the employee an interactional slot where he or she is held accountable for what she or he has written, with regard to the perspectives offered by strategy discourse. In response, in order to account for what he or she has written, the employee may draw on the perceived incompatibility of spiritual and strategic discourse. Even in these cases, however, the participants orient to the organizational expectation that employees should conform to strategy discourse. Thus, we can see how recontextualization of strategy discourse is contingent on interactional practices.

5. Conclusion

Approaching organizational strategies and the doctrine and practice of strategic management as a phenomenon deeply related to language and discourse, previous studies of strategy discourse have brought about the idea that strategy is a language-game, and that the spread of practices, techniques, tools and even ideologies of strategy to different organizations and every corner of society is dependent on the language and discourse (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Pälli et. al, 2009; Mantere, 2013). These studies have thus demonstrated the spreading power of strategy and informed us about the effects of the colonization of strategy in organizations.

Inspired by the organizational studies of strategy discourse, we in this paper set out to investigate how the recontextualization of strategy can be studied as a process at the micro-level of written text and spoken interaction. As our case study in a Finnish Church organization demonstrated, recontextualization takes place on the basis of – and is both constrained and enabled by – textual and conversational practices through which organizational members weave together the discourse of strategy and the discourse that is inherent to their work. In tune with the socio-material approaches regarding the performativity of strategy discourse (e.g. Penttilä, 2020; Pälli, 2018), our study thus highlighted the agentive role of discourse practices in the recontextualization process

In our case, the recontextualization specifically concerned two distinct discourses, one originating from the realm of business and the specific doctrine of strategic management and

the other one rooted in religious spirituality. Our findings showed that the language and discourse of strategy and the language and discourse of religious spirituality were both present and, to a large degree, sat well with each other in the recontextualized strategy discourse in the Church organization. However, our empirical findings suggest a specific pattern of recontextualization, where strategy provides a framework and organizing principle which facilitates the production of local discourse. Put differently, the adoption of strategy discourse meant that the local discourse of work – in our case the spiritually and religiously rooted ways of talking and ways of seeing the world – were reproduced by combining them with conventional or canonical ideas of strategy discourse. Typical recontextualization pattern involved, for example, referring to organizational processes or administrative bodies having to do with strategy implementation, and adding time-frames or measurable performance indicators to descriptions and goals of work. However, implicit and sometimes explicit tensions where persistent, having to do with, e.g., concrete and active language in describing strategic goals, and measurability of spiritual activities having to do with personal faith.

As an important practical implication of our study, we see it beneficial for different organizations that adopt strategic planning and implementation practices to elaborate on the general features and characteristics of strategy discourse in terms of their local context of work. We feel that both sides of the coin, both employing and questioning these features calls for awareness and critical understanding that go beyond the practical knowledge of what a certain feature means towards the underlying worldviews, beliefs, doctrines, and ideologies at play.

Furthermore, our study demonstrates how the organization of interactional activities has a crucial role in the process of recontextualization. We showed in our analysis that the recontextualization of strategy consisted of a chain of activities: the strategy text, the written documentation of personal goals, and a manager-employee conversation where those goals where discussed. In these activities, there were specific interactional slots that offered different opportunities for intertwining strategy discourse with spiritual discourse. Thus, for organizations, their ways of organizing interaction during the strategy process are highly consequential: for example, the kinds of documents, forms, digital platforms, face-to-face encounters are offered and organized. The recontextualization of strategy is a socio-material, discursive, and interactional process, in which detail matters.

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Figure 1. Abstracted visualization of the main findings.

Formal strategy text

Slots offered through structure of genre	Practices
Values, mission and vision sections	Spiritual and religious discourse, e.g. biblical and other religious vocabulary, confessional language
Strategic goals and guidelines	Strategy discourse, e.g. technical language having to with goal-orientedness and measurability, coupled with popular business concepts

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Employees' written reflections

Slots offered by the document structure	Practices
Requests for reflections of personalized goals	Organization-specific and work-related discursive accounts, with no or only implicit action points, often formulated as spiritual practice, using biblical or clerical vocabulary and expressions
Requests for descriptions of implementation	More concrete and measurable actions, e.g. linking actions to organizational processes or administrative bodies related to the strategy implementation process; but also descriptions of concrete religious or spiritual activities; figurative language may be used

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Conversations between manager and employee

Sequential conversational slots	Practices
Managers' requests to reflect on form entries	Heterogenous discourse; spiritual language, including biblical quotes, and theological language in describing goals, sometimes explicating the spiritual basis of the strategy; concretizing spiritually worded goals with expressions from strategy and workplace discourse; argumentative talk that may contain implicit resistance towards strategy discourse
Managers' suggestions to modify entries, e.g. having to do with relationship between goals and implementation, active language, and performance indicators	Agreeing responses where employees enter into reflection with regard to the modification requests; rejections, using spiritual worded accounts; rejections shown to be dispreferred through pauses, restarts and repairs