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The mise-en-sens tactics of civil society organizations to influence strategy _____

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Dans cet article, nous exposons qu'il existe un manque de connaissances concernant les pratiques discursives des Organisations de la Société Civile (OSC) dans leur interaction avec les entreprises. Il est nécessaire de mieux connaître ces pratiques afin de comprendre comment les OSC interagissent avec les entreprises, en particulier pour l'élaboration de la stratégie de ces dernières. Nous montrons que les OSC développent une large palette de pratiques de mise-en-sens qui peuvent être catégorisées en six types selon leur logique respective : les valeurs, l'organisation, les références, l'exploration, le relationnel et l'argumentation. Cette analyse éclaire la façon dont les OSC participent à l'élaboration de la stratégie des entreprises et contribue à mieux faire comprendre comment les individus prennent part à l'élaboration d'une stratégie au travers de pratiques discursives.

Mots-clés : discours, mise-en-sens, société civile, stratégie.

In this article, we argue that there is a specific lack of knowledge concerning the discursive practices used by civil society organizations (CSOs) when interacting with businesses. Such knowledge is required to better understand the way CSOs interact with companies and especially how they participate in strategy elaboration. We show that CSOs develop a number of mise-en-sens micro-practices that can be categorized into six types: value-led practices, organizationally driven practices, reference-led practices, exploration-led practices, relationally driven practices, and argumentation-led practices. This analysis contributes to shedding light on how CSOs participate in a company's strategizing process and helps increase understanding of the aims and means by which individuals strategize through narrative practices.

Mots-clés : discourse, mise-en-sens, civil society organizations, strategy.

Introduction

This paper examines the discursive *mise-en-sens* (Corvellec & Risberg, 2007) micro-practices civil society organizations (CSOs) mobilize to influence companies' strategic development. By drawing on a strategy-as-practice (S-as-P) perspective (Whittington, 1996 ; Jarzabkowski, 2005 ; Whittington, 2006 ; Whittington & al., 2006 ; Jarzabkowski & al., 2007), we aim to increase understanding of the CSO practices that lead to the evolution of companies' business models. While the S-as-P perspective can be incorporated into a variety of theoretical frameworks (Golsorkhi & al., 2010), we draw specifically on the narrative perspective (Fenton & Langley, 2011) in order to explore how CSOs discursively influence companies' strategy. Corvellec and Risberg's (2007) concept of *mise-en-sens* is critical to this analysis, as it encompasses the giving of a pre-conceived sense as well as the way people influence and shape the ways specific situations are understood.

In the context of increased partnerships between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and companies (Pedersen & Pedersen, 2013), this research focuses on a case study of Suez-Environnement (henceforth, Suez) – one of the largest water supply companies – as a gateway for exploring how CSOs (NGOs, researchers, institutional donors, etc.) developed *mise-en-sens* micro-practices in order to influence the evolution of the company's business model (BM). We build on the fact that Suez moved from a single and traditional BM based on volumes to three BMs with various modalities, as the outcome of a five-year discussion process between Suez and CSOs.

We demonstrate that the different CSOs developed 24 *mise-en-sens* micro-practices during this process ; these micro-practices can be categorized into six types : value-led practices, organizationally driven practices, reference-led practices, exploration-led practices, relationally driven practices, and

argumentation-led practices. Whereas Corvellec and Risberg (2007) have focused on argumentation-led practices, we show that a wide range of other practices must be taken into consideration when dealing with how CSOs influence companies' understanding of their own business situations.

This analysis contributes to the development of strategic knowledge in three main ways. First, we shed light on how CSOs participate in a company's strategizing process, namely, we provide new insights into the issue of participation in strategy formulation (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Second, we conduct a comprehensive exploration of the *mise-en-sens* micro-practices that CSOs use to influence the evolution of companies' BMs. The various micro-practices help increase understanding of the aims and means by which individuals strategize through narrative practices. Third, we stress the relevance of taking into consideration the role of people who are external to the company. Within the research domain that focuses upon the actions that people take while strategizing, too little attention has been paid to the role of external stakeholders and their strategic activities alongside and at the service of companies.

The first section of this paper provides an overview of the S-as-P field with an emphasis on narrative practices. We then describe the research design and the methodological choices we made. The third section presents our results. We provide evidence of the practices, and we classify them into types. The discussion section explores the specific contributions that our paper makes to the S-as-P field.

Narratives in the strategy-as-practice field

The S-as-P perspective focuses on who, how, and what people do when they strategize (Whittington, 2006, 1996). This approach deals with the practices through which

strategy is defined and enacted. An integrative view of the field is offered by Whittington's (2006) tripartite framework, which stresses the importance of praxis, practices, and practitioners. Fenton and Langley (2011) have added text as a fourth dimension. In this paper, we follow Fenton and Langley's (2011) conceptualization of narrative to study the actions individuals take when dealing with strategy.

Texts, discourse, and narratives in the S-as-P perspective

The narrative-based perspective in the S-as-P field has led to new insights and methodologies for the study of strategic processes (Barry & Elmes, 1997 ; Samra-Fredericks, 2003 ; Vaara & al., 2006 ; Mantere & Vaara, 2008 ; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). The "narrative turn" (Vaara & al., 2006 ; Fenton & Langley, 2011) of the S-as-P field sets communication and language at the heart of strategizing activities (Balogun & al. 2014), as well as strategic and organizational change (Ford, 1996, 1999). Investigating communication can lead to two key research directions. First, a focus on discourse and storytelling can lead researchers to concentrate on managers' formal discourse and the inscription of this discourse in formalized texts, such as strategic plans, websites, etc. (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011 ; Paroutis & Heracleuous, 2013). In this vein, Mantere and Vaara (2008) have addressed the issue of strategic participation through the analysis of organizational discourse. Second, this focus on narrative can include people's daily speech activities so as to understand the social processes inherent in strategizing (Hoon, 2007). Rouleau (2005) has taken this route in exploring the micro-practices that promote understanding of how middle managers sell strategy to external stakeholders. This social process of strategizing may be addressed using a social interaction perspective, which suggests a focus on people's interactions within the construction of discourse (Greatbatch & Clark, 2010).

In this paper, we adopt a narrative perspective that is more comprehensive than storytelling, namely a coherent discourse with a plot and a formal structure (Czarniawska, 1998). Like Fenton and Langley (2011), we adopt Fisher's (1984, 1989) perspective that views any form of speech to be a form of meaningful communication for the narrative perspective. In adopting this vantage point, we do not exclude any analytical, metaphorical, or rational forms of discourse from our analysis. In our view, this position is an especially effective way of understanding the entire range of discursive forms that people employ when strategizing.

This extended perspective centralizes our focus on two main elements. First, the question of participation (Mantere & Vaara, 2008) is crucial. When considering that any form of discourse can constitute a narrative, the selection of practitioners for a study of narratives is both vital and compulsory, as it would be impossible to analyze every speech act of every practitioner. Therefore, the position we take in this paper has typically led researchers to focus on only one type of practitioner (for example top managers in Samra-Fredericks, 2003) or on one specific strategic episode (Hendry & Seidl, 2003 ; Jarzabkowski, 2005). This narrative perspective (Fenton & Langley, 2011 ; Fisher, 1984 ; Boje, 1991) also implies access to in vivo discourse and is therefore not limited to the strategic and organizational discourse that can be mobilized using interviews. Fenton and Langley (2011) join Greatbatch and Clark (2010) in stressing that further research should enhance understanding of "not only what is being told, but how".

Understanding narratives through sensemaking, sensegiving, and *mise-en-sens*

The link between strategizing and sensemaking has frequently been stressed in previous studies (Balogun & Johnson, 2004 ; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011 ; Balogun, 2011).

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) provide a practice-based analysis of the interaction between sensemaking – “*meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempted to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change*” (p. 442) – and sensegiving – “*the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality*” (p. 442) – during strategic-change processes. The research linking sensemaking and strategizing frequently employs a perspective that positions sensemaking as the process by which “*certain groups influence others’ understanding of issues*” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21), whereas sensemaking does not imply that individuals will share a common meaning.

S-as-P researchers have taken two routes in tackling the concept of sensegiving. Some have examined sensegiving practices through a strategic lens, which has led to a focus on the content of sensegiving activities. In this trend, Rouleau (2005) has identified four sensegiving activities that middle managers develop when they encounter people from the company’s external environment: translating the orientation, overcoding the strategy, disciplining the client, and justifying the change. Other researchers have focused on the form of sensegiving activities rather than on the content of the narrative strategies. Vaara, Tienari, and Laurila (2006) identify five legitimization strategies: normalization, authorization, rationalization, moralization, and narrativization. Samra-Fredericks (2003) outlines six aspects of ethnographic speech analysis: “*speak forms of knowledge; mitigate and observe the protocols of human interaction (the moral order); question and query; display appropriate emotion; deploy metaphors and finally; put history ‘to work’*” (p. 168).

Corvellec and Risberg’s (2007) concept of *mise-en-sens* suggests the “*activity of*

influencing audiences in the direction of a preferred definition of reality”. The authors identify three key activities in this process: contextualization, ontologization, and neutralization of eventual criticism. Corvellec and Risberg (2007) acknowledge that the concept they develop is closely related to sensegiving. However, *mise-en-sens* differs from sensegiving in various ways. First, it is a prospective rather than a retrospective activity. Second, it is more closely oriented to offering-cues than to extracting-cues. Third, it is more grounded in the identity construction process of the project rather than in that of the sensemaker. Finally, it is more oriented to outsiders’ organizational understandings rather than insiders’.

The final two differences have determined our decision to deal with *mise-en-sens* rather than with sensegiving. As *mise-en-sens* is oriented towards people who are not from the organization, but who must still make sense of its situation, the concept is more appropriate than sensegiving to investigate how outsiders influence a company’s understanding of its own strategic position. Moreover, we deal with the strategic evolution of the company’s BM, as opposed to the identity of the sensemaker. Hence, what is at stake is the ongoing social process that leads to the evolution of strategy.

Mise-en-sens must be differentiated from rhetoric; not only does it focus on micro-discourse content analysis, it also deals with the narrative practices that form a more aggregated analytical unit. Furthermore, *mise-en-sens* does not consider word arrangements or linguistic styles. However, if *mise-en-sens* does borrow anything from rhetoric, it is its combination of social elements with ethos, logos, and pathos, the traditional Aristotelian grid for rhetoric analysis (Irwin & Fine, 1995). Aside from these similarities, it deals with the more general practices that people use in order to influence understandings of reality.

Methodology

Suez, the organization under investigation, is a large multinational corporation specialized in water and sanitation services. A large number of CSOs took part in the strategic evolution that emerged from a conflict in

Argentina in the 1990s. The Societal Engineering Director of Suez sponsored us and enabled us to gain access to the field. We conducted a longitudinal case study of a period extending from 1992 to 2012. The retrospective study from 1992 to 2007 aimed at understanding the beginning context of

Figure 1
Timeline of Suez-Environnement's strategic evolution

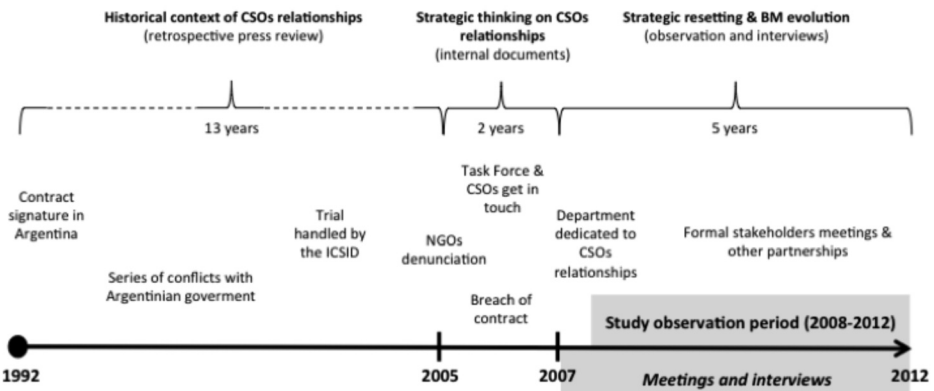


Tableau 1
Evidence of CSO influence on strategic thinking within Suez

| Speaker | Date & place | Verbatim |
|--|---------------------------|--|
| Social Engineering Director, SUEZ | 2008, Stakeholder Meeting | <i>"Everything I just told you [about the segmentation] comes directly from their [CSOs] comments, their criticisms, their suggestions. That's what I call "a real partnership". [...] In general, civil society expectations towards companies are real ones. Actions and action plans are expected."</i> |
| Project Officer, Social Engineering Department, SUEZ | 2009, Stakeholder Meeting | <i>"The first stakeholder meetings led us to two things: a segmentation and a strategic plan. Concerning the segmentation, we realized that Suez is accountable to its traditional contract-based business and to not-for-profit corporate sponsorship in the field of water access. The starting point for this reflection was actually to identify situations where Suez was able to step in."</i> |
| Social Engineering Director, SUEZ | 2009, Stakeholder Meeting | <i>"The 2007 stakeholders' requests led us to two main conclusions: the increase of aid contributions through corporate sponsorship and the role of Suez in the intermediate segment. This strategic reflection started just after the trouble we got into abroad. [...]. Therefore, we're trying to determine the role of Suez-Environnement in this area."</i> |

cooperative relations between Suez and CSOs, and the investigation of the period from 2007 to 2012 focused on the observation of CSO-company relations. Figure 1 shows the strategic evolution and indicates the nature of CSO-Suez relations as they developed over time.

The timeline shows that an institutional dialogue process between Suez and CSOs began in 2007. From 2007 to 2010, the company set up a representative panel of CSOs to share ideas about the way the company should integrate stakeholders' expectations in its activities. This dialogue led to one main strategic output: a new strategic segmentation for the water management activities of Suez. This segmentation was expected to enable the company to manage supplying water services into complex areas. Table 1 provides contextual evidence of the influence of the contributions of CSOs to strategic thinking within Suez.

Data collection

The study focuses on the narrative micro-practices used by CSOs to influence the strategic processes of Suez. The data collection process involved two distinct steps. The first one was to understand the context of the policy concerned with Suez-CSO relations. This part of the study is based on a press review that traces the experience of

Suez in Argentina. Through the Factiva database, 376 newspaper articles covering the period between 1993 and 2007 were collected. Formal meetings with officers assigned to CSO relations completed the data. In addition, second-hand data such as internal archives and strategic reports were consulted. Both interviews and second-hand data were used in order to apprehend the influence of this dialogue process on the company's strategy.

The second step of the data collection constituted the core of our research material. We were able to observe meetings that were part of the institutionalized dialogue process and that represented the core of the company's policy on CSOs relations. Between 2007 and 2010, we attended five meetings between representatives from CSOs and Suez (Table 2). These meetings were all recorded and transcribed, and constitute the main data for the analysis. The data collection was completed with 10 semi-structured interviews with members from different CSOs and from Suez management.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved five steps. First, descriptive coding identified the main topics that were discussed by meeting participants. Second, verbatim statements in which CSOs expressed a kind of *mise-en-sens* for other

Tableau 2
The five meetings between 2007 and 2010

| | Date | Subject | Number of CSOs | Length |
|---|----------|--|----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 09/03/07 | Distribution of drinking water: how to do our job | 27 | All day 61-page document |
| 2 | 07/01/08 | Distribution of drinking water: 3 segments | 20 | All day 40-page document |
| 3 | 28/04/09 | Access to drinking water: corporate patronage and 4P model | 22 | All day 61-page document |
| 4 | 27/07/09 | Business ethics and transparency | 20 | All day 58-page document |
| 5 | 14/12/10 | Plenum | 22 | All day 60-page document |

participants (i.e. attempts to influence their definitions of reality) were isolated. Third, we identified elements that would characterize both the form and the content of discourse. These elements correspond with the elements of discourse in the data structure (1st order concept combination in Table 3). Fourth, elements of discourse were

combined in order to form coherent combinations of *mise-en-sens* micro-practices. These combinations are our 2nd order concepts. A number of combinations have been identified in previous studies of sensegiving and *mise-en-sens* tactics/practices/strategies (Rouleau, 2005 ; Vaara & al., 2006 ; Corvellec & Risberg, 2007), while

Tableau 3
Taxonomy structure

| 1 st order concepts combination (elements of discourse) | 2 nd order concepts (micro-practices) | Type | |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Involving responsibility (explicit or implicit) Mentioning speaker's own responsibility Mentioning own positions or aims | Invoking self-responsibility | Value-led practices | |
| Mentioning stakeholders Mentioning other participants' own responsibility | Invoking others' responsibility | | |
| Appealing to moral values Appealing to moral principles Providing link with practical situations Providing abstraction through values | Moralization | | |
| Mentioning other projects Mentioning previous comments in the meeting Mentioning comments from previous meetings Stressing elements that have been forgotten / that have not been said previously | Recalling | | Organizationally driven practices |
| Explaining the role of each participant in the meeting Giving a say to participants Explaining the rules of the meeting | Organizing | | |
| Mentioning the status of people Explaining what is good or not | Authorization | | |
| Mentioning other projects Taking other projects as reference Comparing with other projects to show what is usual | Normalization | Reference-led practices | |
| Mentioning other projects Showing specificities Explaining that the norm is not a norm | Denormalization | | |
| Posing a question in two parts One part of the question is the preferred answer | Alternative questioning | Exploration-led practices | |
| Posing a question in one or two parts No expected answer is included in the question | Open questioning | | |
| Posing a question inserted in a sentence Mentioning a concern of the speaker | Reflexive questioning | | |
| Mentioning own emotions Linking of emotions with practical evidence Thanking others for what they do Stressing the efforts of others | Emotional delivery Showing empathy | | |
| Mentioning the status / role of people Explaining why the speaker may not be in position of knowing | Minimizing the position | Relationally driven practices | |
| Mentioning other participants Including somebody with the same opinion | Inclusion | | |
| Saying the opposite of what the speaker thinks Showing the "stupidity" or "inanity" of what has been said previously Trying to destabilize another participant | Ironizing | | |

| | | |
|--|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Relating elements of the projects to many other elements | Complexifying | Argumentation-led practices |
| Stressing the alternative plausible explanations of facts Stressing that some things remain unknown | | |
| Describing in-depth elements of the project | Ontologizing | |
| Mentioning numerous details | | |
| Stressing various positive or negative outcomes as emerging from a situation | | |
| Providing a context for situations | Contextualizing | |
| Giving a story | | |
| Removing the context of a situation | Decontextualizing | |
| Placing the focus on moral / rational elements without context | | |
| Mentioning universal elements | | |
| Mentioning constraints | Rationalizing | |
| Mentioning the functions of departments and organizations | | |
| Mentioning the roles of people | | |
| Mentioning the company's objective-led actions | | |
| Describing another situation(s) to illustrate the current situation | Metaphoring | |
| Posing questions that appear to have their own answers | Closed questioning | |
| Formulating a question in such a way that only one answer is possible | | |
| Focusing on others' illegitimacy | Neutralizing | |
| Answering criticism | | |
| Arguing before a problem is raised | | |
| Acknowledging problems | | |

others have not. Finally, we classified the 24 micro-practices into six types that share common aspects. Table 3 presents the data structure built according to this five-step process.

The *mise-en-sens* micro-practices of CSOs and the strategy of Suez

The analysis helped identify 24 *mise-en-sens* micro-practices used by CSOs to influence the activities of Suez. These 24 micro-practices are grouped in six types of practices, explored in the following sections in order to understand how CSOs practiced narrative influence in their dealings with Suez.

Mise-en-sens micro-practices of the value-led type

Three micro-practices constitute the value-led type: invoking others' responsibility, invoking self-responsibility, and moralization. Collectively, these practices are based on the values of the individuals involved. These values may be the values of the speaker or of

the interlocutor(s); they place exchanges on a moral footing, which leads to discussions about what is good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate, ethical or non-ethical, etc.

Mise-en-sens micro-practices of the organizationally driven type

The organizationally driven type encompasses two micro-practices that are enacted so that CSOs can organize meetings. The aim is to set and reset the organizational basis, the meeting or the conversation by either considering the role of people in the meeting or by trying to rearrange the order of the topics and themes being discussed in that meeting. These micro-practices influence the strategy and BM formulation in two different ways. Through recalling, CSO stakeholders select the elements that they wish to put stress on in the construction of meaning. For example, elements of synthesis from previous workshops are provided by a CSO called Comité 21, which is responsible for setting the agenda for the next meeting. Through organizing, CSOs propose a layout

Tableau 4
Data exemplifying the value-led type

| Micro-practice | Definition | Data |
|--|---|--|
| Invoking others' responsibility | Mentioning other participants in the meeting to associate their position and experience with the speaker's arguments. | <p>"We're not asking Suez to change the planet, just to change its employees' behaviors." (NGO, 2009)</p> <p>"I don't understand Suez-Environnement's story with Haiti, or why it did not deploy the required resources to provide immediate technical support." (NGO, 2010)</p> <p>"Does Suez-Environnement consider using its influence to challenge the financial partners in order to make them aware of field practices – which require investment – and to reconsider their usual ROI systems?" (NGO, 2010)</p> <p>"Nevertheless, I consider that your know-how is crucial for the world. I would therefore suggest that you behave more proactively, considering the challenges that the world is presenting you with." (NGO, 2010)</p> |
| Invoking self-responsibility | Acknowledging one's own responsibility for a fact or opinion | <p>"When the Comité 21 proposes a discussion session, we care about making people from various departments participate." (Comité 21, 2010)</p> <p>"I was very critical about the private sector in the past." (NGO, 2010)</p> |
| Moralization | "Moralization is legitimation that refers to specific values." (Vaara & al., 2006, p.19) | <p>"Big cities prefer to keep their profits to finance loss-making activities. In this way, they don't contribute to national or regional adjustments." (Researcher, 2009)</p> <p>"Is it possible to reconcile the stock-value maximization logic with sustainable development?" (Public Organization, 2009)</p> <p>"Are the French willing to share water? They use 250 liters per day – is it normal that others have only 5?" (NGO, 2009)</p> |

for the discussion and provide roles for participants. In the end, this role distribution and the ability to give a voice to certain individuals instead of others influenced the debates on Suez's strategy.

Mise-en-sens micro-practices of the reference-led type

This type relies on references used to influence understanding of other participants' situation. These references could be the status of the speaker or another project that a stakeholder wants to provide as a standard for argumentation. A third micro-practice lies in the desire not to understand a project as a reference simply

because it provides specificities that have not been taken into consideration by previous participants. Such a comparison or norm cannot be justified as being rigorous.

Mise-en-sens micro-practices of the exploration-led type

The exploration-led type includes a set of mise-en-sens micro-practices related to the desire to move towards a deeper understanding of the situation. While the three micro-practices share the fact that they appear to be questions, they do not take the same form, and the aims of participants who enact these micro-practices tend to vary. Whereas open questioning or reflexive

Tableau 5
Data exemplifying the organizationally driven type

| Micro-practice | Definition | Data |
|----------------|---|--|
| Organizing | Proposing an organization or layout for the discussion. Distributing formal roles. | <i>"Welcome all! I am a member of the Comité 21, which is in charge of conducting this stakeholder discussion. We will break the agenda in two parts: first, a general presentation, and then thematic subgroups." (Comité 21, 2009)</i> |
| | | <i>"It is necessary that stakeholders who could not participate in a workshop can express themselves and ask complementary questions. It is my role to propose a summary of the sponsoring workshop." (Comité 21, 2009)</i> |
| Recalling | Reiterating a theme or sentence that was previously mentioned in the same meeting in order to shift/reinforce the issue | <i>"This morning, the questions were raised by both NGOs and by Suez. We are here to create a link between stakeholders and the company. The main objective is the evaluation of the sustainable development strategy, but this should not prevent exchanges." (Comité 21, 2009)</i> |
| | | <i>"I would like to return to the discussion of the role of actors." (Researcher, 2009)</i> |
| | | <i>"I wanted to bring up again one of the main remarks about institutional donors." (NGO, 2009)</i> |
| | | <i>"I would like to talk again about the project owner and local public representatives." (NGO, 2009)</i> |
| | | <i>"My question dealt more with the pricing policy for a population that would not be able to afford water." (NGO, 2010)</i> |

questioning consist in posing real questions to the audience, alternative questioning suggests that only one of several answers is true. Nevertheless, we decided to classify it in the exploration dimension because these micro-practices aim at exploring the situation via a kind of provocation, which leads to further development by other participants.

Mise-en-sens micro-practices of the relationally driven type

The *mise-en-sens* micro-practices of the relationally driven type are used by actors who wish to build, change, or break the relational links that develop between actors during a meeting. For example, emotional

delivery aims at making people share an emotional state about a specific situation. It therefore aims at creating a feeling of togetherness with some stakeholders and opposition with others. Conversely, the micro-practice of showing empathy leads to a recognition of the other and to the creation of an atmosphere in which actors show that they understand the position of their interlocutor and in which they may acknowledge the difficulties inherent in the interlocutor's activities. The practice of inclusion aims at showing that others share a participant's opinion, namely that their argument is not centered on a foolish standpoint or has been based on an inadequate analysis.

Tableau 6

Data exemplifying the reference-led type

| Micro-practice | Definition | Data |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Authorization | <p>“Legitimation by reference to authority. These authorities can be the journalist him/herself, someone in whom institutionalized authority is vested, or impersonal, for example, laws, regulations, or conventions.” (Vaara & al., 2006, p.15)</p> | <p>“I was a member of the ISO committee about water purification for 6 years, as well as the author of the norm 24 for service users.” (NGO, 2010)</p> <p>“As a socially responsible user, my aim is to insure that such programs continue to run.” (NGO, 2010)</p> <p>“As a member of the OECD consumption committee, I am astonished that the current updating of main directions for multinational companies doesn’t mention ISO 26000.” (NGO, 2010)</p> |
| Normalization | <p>“Render[ing] something legitimate [and normal] by exemplarity, which can involve ‘retrospective’ (similar cases/events/practices in the past) or ‘prospective’ (new cases/events/practices to be expected) references.” (Vaara & al., 2006, pp.13-14)</p> | <p>“Somebody said that public versus private is not really an issue. Unfortunately, our experience has taught us that it remains an issue that is felt very deeply by both proponents and opponents of private sector involvement.” (NGO, 2008)</p> <p>“I would like to refer to the Burkina Faso project because it illustrates the situation quite well. When a national strategy is unclear, when local, regional and national competent partners are present, when small-size private partners are available, when an operator can work so that the sector coherently improves step by step and that a group of private operators establishes [...] In such conditions, Suez can play a major role.” (NGO, 2009)</p> <p>“This story shows the difference between the private and public sectors. I noticed that the private sector was more progressive, but more intransigent on one point: the publication of concession contracts. Transparency generates extremely high reluctance from the public sector. For example, the Berlin contract is not published and could be published only as a consequence of legal procedure.” (NGO, 2010)</p> |
| Denormalization | <p>Rendering the norm illegitimate or abnormal because it has specificities that should be taken into consideration</p> | <p>“Your projects in Haiti and Algiers are interesting. Nevertheless, they deal with small areas.” (Researcher, 2010)</p> |

Mise-en-sens micro-practices of the argumentation-led type

Argumentation-led micro-practices are those that individuals use to argumentatively convince other people of the legitimacy of their positions or propositions. The micro-practices of this type are similar in that in all

of them, it is the rationality of the content of the proposition that is being addressed, and therefore the coherence of the whole argumentation that is being put forward. However, although these micro-practices share those characteristics, they differ in the forms that they take. For example, complexifying micro-practices aim at

Tableau 7
Data exemplifying the exploration-led type

| Micro-practice | Definition | Data |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Alternative questioning | Asking a question that presents two or more possible answers and presupposes that only one is true | <p><i>“Does the company try to manage this difficulty through a parallel association that has virtues which are autonomic to the company’s own, or do you want to develop a human and social laboratory with Aquassistance that gets rid of market pressure to makes the company change?” (NGO, 2009)</i></p> <p><i>“Improving water services in big cities is one objective, but wondering if the company has a role to play in Africa, where millions of people do not have drinkable water, is another one.” (Researcher, 2008)</i></p> |
| Open questioning | Questioning with no intended or expected answer, leading to the emergence of sensemaking | <p><i>“Concerning sponsoring activities, do you operate in countries where Suez already operates or in other countries?” (Researcher, 2009)</i></p> <p><i>“My first question deals with the articulation between local and national levels of project owners: Who invests in such projects?” (Institutional donor, 2009)</i></p> <p><i>“What are the criteria by which you define success?” (Institutional donor, 2009)</i></p> <p><i>“In the participative model, what elements do you consider to be ‘local characteristics’?” (Researcher, 2009)</i></p> |
| Reflexive questioning | Questioning oneself in order to suggest doubt or wonderings to the audience | <p><i>“I am wondering about the influence that ISO 26000 generates; more precisely about the relation with water access.” (NGO, 2010)</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t know where the word ‘autonomy’ comes from... I wonder why it is emerging now.” (Researcher, 2009)</i></p> <p><i>“The first sentence sounds like assistance for project owners. Therefore, we have specifications at our disposal for this activity. In your model, I have difficulties understanding the transition phase and the time that you got involved.” (Researcher, 2009)</i></p> |

stressing the fact that the situation is more complex than previously thought. Ontologizing practices involve participants who describe a concept, a situation, a fact, to the extent that the concept is reified through thick description. Contextualizing and decontextualizing practices are in opposition to this. At times, people stress the fact that what is said must take the specificities of a situation into account (contextualizing); on other occasions, they take general principles that are exposed as valuable for any situation, and the context is of no interest (decontextualizing). The use of metaphors

(metaphoring) emphasizes the specificities of a situation that has to be taken into consideration; it de-frames the situation so that other people can gain new insights about it.

Neutralizing forces people to acknowledge that the other’s attacks are legitimate. This process leads to enhanced sympathy for people who have the ability to recognize their mistakes, errors, or forgetfulness. When participants provide arguments in the hope of neutralizing future criticisms, they also protect themselves against future objections.

Tableau 8
Data exemplifying the relationally-driven type

| Micro-practice | Definition | Data |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Emotional delivery | Sharing somebody's emotional state with other people in the discussion | <p>"A few days ago, we received a summary of the questions and answers related to that meeting. The waffling of the answers puzzled me!" (Researcher, 2010)</p> <p>"I've been shocked for one year because your employees' behaviors are in total contradiction with the ethics that you claim!" (NGO, 2010)</p> |
| Showing empathy | Showing the meeting members that they are understood and that their position is acknowledged | <p>"I wanted to welcome the company because it is a brave behavior to expose like this, to prove such open-minded and listening capacity." (Comité 21, 2009)</p> <p>"I must admit that such a program is hard to implement." (Researcher, 2009)</p> |
| Minimizing the position | Minimizing the status or the knowledge held in order to introduce and stress a strong idea | <p>"This program leads us to wonder about your ability to implement this dialogue. I have to admit that it is not something spontaneous and natural. We are learning how to dialogue with stakeholders. We need you to tell us what we can do. This open discussion has to remove the problems of the company. We still have to improve in this field." (Suez, 2009)</p> |
| Inclusion | Stressing a common interest without any rational argumentation to include the interlocutor in the speaker's own interest area | <p>"We are not able to understand the model, and you yourselves cannot formalize it because we lack a number of essential elements." (Researcher, 2009)</p> <p>"I want to relate to what's just been said." (NGO, 2009)</p> <p>"You're talking about an involvement on every level of the national administration. That's what we're all leaning towards." (NGO, 2009)</p> <p>"I am pleasantly surprised by this work as it helps us to see in the future. This 'building phase' about the new contract schemes seems to be crucial. It fits with the work that is led by Sherpa regarding the concept of a sustainable contract. It can relate to the general interest." (NGO, 2009)</p> |
| Ironizing | Expressing an utterance marked by a deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning | <p>"I would like to salute the nice paradigm that appears in your discourse, but I would like to know what would happen if the price of the stock decreased..." (NGO, 2009)</p> <p>"It is of course a matter of the sustainable access to water for all, and not only for the business sector!" (NGO, 2009)</p> |

Closed questioning is more attack-oriented than defense-oriented, much as neutralizing is, as it leads one to formulate questions that have only one answer. This practice is mainly used so that the interlocutor is forced to acknowledge that the speaker's opinion is legitimate.

Rationalization aims at justifying which functions and properties of facts, stakeholders, or other elements can legitimize action. This practice is in opposition to moralization, as it aims to eliminate personal judgment. Rather, it focuses on objective elements that the other participants might consider rational.

Tableau 9

Data exemplifying the argumentation-led type

| Micro-practice | Definition | Data |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Complexifying | Describing a situation in a complex manner in order to stress that the discourse of the interlocutor is overly simplistic | <p><i>"Your presentation is a bit too theoretical. Those who have experience with local communities in poor countries know that it is difficult to develop general frameworks."</i> (NGO, 2009)</p> <p><i>"The model introduced seems insufficiently anchored in reality. In relation to training and competence transfer, which seem to be a major stake in numerous countries, I have the feeling that there is a combination of things that don't match."</i> (Researcher, 2009)</p> <p><i>"To understand the model, I need to know if you use a service quality norm, and to what extent – from which grade, on which scale – the project can be implemented in a given socio-economic context."</i> (Researcher, 2009)</p> |
| Contextualizing | Framing a situation, i.e. "a way to manage meaning by selecting and highlighting certain facts or issues over others", thus selecting backgrounds. (Corvellec & Risberg, 2007, p.315) | <p><i>"I'd like to remind you that we have accompanied Suez in discussions since 2007. This aims to improve the fit between the company strategy and expectations, enriching the firm's ability to rethink its engagement in terms of sustainable development. So, the company should define its commitment in a more precise way, modifying its activities. You'll be there to evaluate the output."</i> (Comité 21, 2009)</p> <p><i>"The role of local authorities is very important when considering the law for the skill transfer of water resource management."</i> (Public organization, 2009)</p> <p><i>"Middle-sized cities in South Africa tried to implement free water services in certain areas, but the authorities noticed that exploitation costs were not fundable by other users. That's why they came back to the subventions systems."</i> (Researcher, 2009)</p> |
| Decontextualizing | Extracting a situation or an opinion from its context in order to focus on general considerations | <p><i>"We do not talk about the philosophical aspects of water, but concentrate instead on its technical aspects. This approach is essential in improving the companies' images. I regret that the question of water is often addressed through prices and not services."</i> (NGO, 2009)</p> |
| Metaphoring | Using implicit and illustrative comparisons to stress specific characteristics of a thing or situation | <p><i>"Suez is a large ship; a small NGO is not able to make the ship move after two small consultation meetings."</i> (NGO, 2009)</p> <p><i>"The discussion is like "3 cushion tactics" characterized by exchanges between the company and stakeholders, and between stakeholders who get to know each other, and within the company itself."</i></p> |
| Neutralizing | Communicating with stakeholders to neutralize their criticisms by 1) tackling potential problems before they are raised, 2) answering criticism, or 3) acknowledging objections. (Corvellec & Risberg, 2007) | <p><i>"I was criticized for not clearly responding to the question that was asked."</i> (NGO, 2009)</p> <p><i>"I don't think that the 4P procedure is worth it if there has been no prior dialogue with the city or with the country. Operations led by IGD in Togo, in Benin or somewhere else will create the preparatory conditions that favor discussions and the negotiation of a 4P program within the water sector."</i> (NGO, 2009)</p> |

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Closed questioning | Asking a question and giving one's answer just after or within the question | <p><i>"Wouldn't it be better to start by practicing, to experiment and implement it and then to build a model which could prove to be adequate in other areas or other contexts?" (Public organization, 2009)</i></p> <p><i>"Shouldn't we separate things and say that on the one hand Suez is able to provide intellectual services, and on the other it plays the role of an operator?" (Researcher, 2009)</i></p> <p><i>"This morning stockholders were disturbed, but are they able to change?" (NGO, 2009)</i></p> |
| Ontologizing | Defining a situation almost to saturation point "as a composite of unique features intended to comprehend its reality and define its identity in a unique way". (Corvellec & Risberg, 2007, p.316) | <p><i>"Water resources should absolutely be distinguished from public water services: these two goods are both impure economic goods, but they are also very different. The one implies a rivalry without any possibility of exclusion. The other implies excludability without rivalry (at least in principle). [...] The problem with water services is that they are historically associated with public health. Consequently, water services are defined as a "collective good" whereby all people should be a member: if a member cannot pay the fee, the society has to pay for this member. [...] The 'collective good' reflects that there is an infrastructure for which we have to pay the costs. [...] Separating water resources and public services leads to distinguishing between developing and developed countries. In rich countries, everybody can be a member of the club (each member can pay their water bill). Conversely, in poor countries, a lot of people can't access water. In these conditions, water could be legitimately considered as a public service and a pure public good. Water should then be completely managed by the state and financed by taxes." (Researcher, 2007)</i></p> |
| Rationalization | "Legitimation by reference to the utility or function of specific actions or practices" (Vaara & al., 2006, p.17). The practice refers to logical argumentation. | <p><i>"On the one hand, this vision supposes a noteworthy transformation of big companies into playing the roles of institutions. On the other hand, this new mission requires a drastic modification of the way that water services are managed today." (Researcher, 2007)</i></p> <p><i>"Somebody said that the public versus private debate is not really an issue. Unfortunately, our experience has taught us that it remains an issue that is felt very deeply by both proponents and opponents of private sector involvement. Some people believe that since water is a human right, it should be free, especially for poor people. It is important to keep in mind why it is necessary to pay for water and who is going to pay. If the government opts for cross-subsidization, everyone needs to understand that somebody is going to pay more. We also need to address the issue of why the price of water often rises when a private service replaces a public one. If the private sector or a new public utility is taking over a system that has been poorly run and maintained for many years, it is necessary to explain this to consumers so that they understand why prices are rising." (NGO, 2007)</i></p> <p><i>"We are not actors. We are behind the actor that is the project owner. It is the state that sets the rules of the game, not us. We intervene as a support for public policies." (Institutional donor, 2009)</i></p> |

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we have actively sought an understanding of how language and communication are used as practices for people to strategize (Fenton & Langley, 2011). We have provided an in-depth study of the *in vivo* communication process and demonstrated how such a focus can lead to an increased understanding of how external stakeholders such as CSOs influence a company's strategy. In the following sections, the significance of our findings is discussed from a dual perspective. First, we examine how these findings can be situated within the S-as-P narrative field, and second, we consider how the issue of participation in the S-as-P field is reflected in our results.

Mise-en-sens micro-practices for S-as-P

This study has identified 24 *mise-en-sens* micro-practices grouped into six types. Out of the five legitimization strategies identified by Vaara, Tienari and Laurila (2006) – normalization, authorization, rationalization, moralization, and narrativization – four can be considered as *mise-en-sens* micro-practices in the context of this study. Another 20 micro-practices were identified. As all micro-practices rely on narrativization, narrativization cannot be considered as a micro-practice; it seems that the level of analysis may be different for the narrativization strategy.

Moreover, Corvellec and Risberg's (2007) *mise-en-sens* activities – ontologizing, rationalizing and neutralizing – are all present in our data, and they all belong to the argumentative type. We have shown that an effective combination of various types of practices may provide a crucial means of influencing an audience. In this sense, we have provided a more complete view of *mise-en-sens* micro-practices that can be used by practitioners to influence audiences. We hold that the micro-practices that emerge from this analysis can be loosely coupled with the

Aristotelian triptych of ethos, pathos, and logos (Irwin & Fine, 1995). Ethos relies on emotions much as emotional delivery micro-practices do; logos relies on rational argumentation, just like argumentation-led practices; and ethos relies on people, as do relationally driven practices. Nevertheless, even though reference-led or organization-led practices seem relevant (but do not fit into the triptych), our *in vivo* analysis of strategic episodes has led us to identify specific micro-practices that are relevant for strategic purposes.

Hence, we consider that the *mise-en-sens* micro-practices and the concept of types provide two relevant levels of analysis when considering narrative influences on strategizing. We chose to analyze *mise-en-sens* in a way that is not focused on language skills (Samra-Fredericks, 2003) (e.g. language registers, which words to say first and last) or on the necessary discursive constructions (e.g. what theme to talk about first). This is relevant in two respects. First, our decision to focus on an intermediary level provides insights for practitioners about how to become technicians of language, and not simply political discourse specialists: the 24 micro-practices that we identify can be mobilized by anybody wishing to influence how people make sense of a situation. Second, the types of micro-practices provide a clear view of the six main directions that people can take while attempting to use *mise-en-sens* micro-practices. In other words, practitioners can first select what kind of types they wish to deal with, and then select which micro-practice within that type might best influence specific values, references, arguments, relational considerations, etc.

Strategic practices and the organization's borders

In this study, we provide evidence that CSOs take part in a unique kind of dialogue with companies. The process that was investigated exists because the company involved is

convinced that considering not only CSOs' expectations but also their understanding of business situations is crucial to its long-term development. We selected to consider CSOs, who participate in this strategic thinking process, as the main characters of our study. In doing so, we contribute to the discussion about participation in strategic processes (Whittington, 1996 ; Jarzabkowski & al., 2007 ; Mantere & Vaara, 2008). The S-as-P perspective has rehabilitated practitioners as the main element of strategy: while a critical perspective on the study of strategy participation may put the stress on the fact that the main processes are still empirically dominated by top managers (Mantere & Vaara, 2008), a review of important work in the field reveals that researchers also pay close attention to other strategy practitioners such as middle managers, supervisors and processing team members, project managers, operational managers, strategic business unit (peripheral) strategy teams, consultants, clients, and government bodies (Jarzabkowski & al., 2007). Thus, although some studies still legitimately focus on top management (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002 ; Jarzabkowski, 2003 ; Sminia, 2005), the S-as-P field has shifted the focus away from chief executive officers in favor of other actors such as middle management, and not only on recognized strategists but on all people who participate in strategizing (Westley, 1990 ; Balogun & Johnson, 2004 ; Currie & Procter, 2005 ; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Nevertheless, an overview of which practitioners have been focused on in previous research reveals that only government bodies have been truly considered as relevant practitioners; none of the other CSOs we included in this study were seriously considered in previous S-as-P research. In contrast, we have shown that NGOs, silent partners, researchers, and local public partners all take part as *mise-en-sens* practitioners in a collective strategic sensemaking activity that has a considerable impact on BM (re)definition. However, the S-

as-P field must take into account not only internal practitioners, but also marginal secants (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980) and outsiders who take part in strategic processes through collective dialogue, much as the case study of Suez has suggested.

Stressing the role of outside practitioners that are not dominant in the S-as-P field brings into question the strategic decisions and processes that are linked to and made up of practices that take place outside of the company's borders, or that are enacted by individuals who are outsiders to the company. This entails the pursuit of strategic intelligence within the S-as-P field: How do practitioners mobilize discourse inside and outside of companies so as to enable strategic information to be grasped, to be circulated in strong networks, and to serve as a source of input for strategic decisions? Clearly, the practices of outsiders who take part in this strategic intelligence process are a key issue that must be addressed by the S-as-P field.

Limitations and perspective

This research study has been conducted in the context of the strategic evolution of Suez-Environnement. Accordingly, we consider this strategic evolution to be the central context of this study and focus on the CSOs' *mise-en-sens* micro-practices. Furthermore, we have illustrated the fact that the interactions between Suez and CSOs are critical to the process of strategic thinking. We consider that further investigation of such CSO-company relations could be made in order to gain further insight into the strategic outcomes of such interactions in terms of strategic thinking and/or BM evolution. For example, which *mise-en-sens* micro-practices work better than others to help reach a preferred definition of reality? What are the *mise-en-sens* micro-practices that eventually lead to strategic or operational decisions? In other words, even if a direct relation between narratives in CSO-

company interactions and main strategic decisions may be hard to prove empirically, in what ways do narratives produce something other than themselves in terms of ideas and patterns of organizational becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) ?

Moreover, we have focused on *mise-en-sens* micro-practices from the “how” point of view of narrative practices, which is of primary interest if we are to understand how narrative takes part in the strategizing process (Greatbatch & Clark, 2010 ; Fenton & Langley, 2011). The impact of communication on the sensemaking and sensegiving processes that underlie strategy and strategic change is of premium importance. Further research might also focus on the forms that narrative practices take, and we believe that a *mise-en-sens* content analysis of the micro-practices (with elements of the business model) of practitioners (operational members of the company, type of stakeholders, senior managers, etc.) would provide a broader understanding of narrative within the S-as-P field. In sum, such research would lead to a more fruitful understanding of the practice of strategizing through narrative by answering the questions of “Who ?”, “What ?”, and “How ?”

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