Grammars of Organising and Sense-Making

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Abstract

The issue of organisational sense-making has been much researched and written about in recent years. However, despite the extensive literature that has been devoted to articulating the crucial aspects of sense-making little has been written about how structurally such sense-making attempts are actually facilitated and realised. Instead much of the attention tends to be focused on the features of sense-making or the sequence of steps involved. In this paper we explore the underlying organising grammars that enable the sense-making process to be accomplished, sustained and extended. Grammar is what makes collective meaning possible and in this paper we examine three organising grammars of sense-making for legitimising and justifying managerial actions and decision-making within the context of a family-owned newspaper called the Courier. We do this through a study of the narratives employed in the sense-making process.

Keywords: positive unconscious, episteme, resemblance, emulation, mathesis, heteroglossia

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Introduction

'I take grammar to mean the articulate organization of perception, reflection and experience, the nerve-structure of consciousness…' (George Steiner, Grammars of Creation, 2001: 5).

The issue of organisational sense-making has been much researched and written about in recent years (Louis, 1980; Huber and Daft, 1987; Starbuck and Milliken, 1988; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995, 2001). Weick, perhaps the foremost advocate of the sense-making perspective, identifies seven properties of sense-making that emphasise the fact that it is: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environment, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. He compares the task of sense-making to that of cartography. Like the terrain the mapmakers seek to represent, the sense-maker seeks to convert 'a world of experience into an intelligible world' (Weick, 2001: 9). Yet as Weick points out, this process of conversion is not such a straightforward activity as it might seem. The central problem of sense-making is quite unlike a puzzle-solving game such as Mastermind where the essential task is for a player to discover a true hidden code that has already been inserted by a code-maker. Instead, in sense-making, the essential task is to create a coherent and plausible account of what is going on without ever really seeking a one true and final picture of how the world actually is. The crucial imagery portrayed in sense-making is the impression that: 'there is nobody here but us scratching around trying to make our experience and our world as comprehensible to ourselves in the best way we can, that the various kinds of order we come up with are a product of our own imagination' (Fay, 1990: 38). Despite the extensive literature that has been devoted to articulating the crucial aspects of sense-making following Weick's seminal contributions, little has been written about how structurally such 'various kinds of order' become possible. Instead much of the attention as we have seen is paid to either the 'properties' of the sense-making process or the sequence of 'steps' involved (Weick, 1995, 2001).
meaning, order and regularity are accomplished in the sense-making process remains unexamined.

In this paper, we argue that sense-making involves the invoking of an established conceptual grammar for ordering the world. Grammar, according to the Oxford Dictionary is a set of governing rules 'for forming words and combining them into sentences'. The practice of sense-making involves selecting and attending to, censoring and centering the flux of our phenomenal experiences using an established set of governing linguistic rules. Such grammars of organising and sense-making may vary from epoch to epoch or from culture to culture. Grammar makes collective meaning possible. Through the use of grammar, the processes of inclusion/exclusion, the fixing of key reference points as well as the setting-up of procedures for reading and interpreting sense-data are systematically regularised and installed as social conventions. Like map-making, sense-making requires adherence to certain established rules, principles and conventions for it to be at all productively intelligible within a community. In other words, a generative structure of linguistic rules, principles and limiting conditions must be first put in place for sense-making to successfully occur. Such rules, principles and established conventions constitute here what we mean by the organising grammar of sense-making.

What are the contemporary underlying grammars of organisational sense-making? How are meanings, values and beliefs wrought out and sustained from the 'blooming buzzing confusion' (James, 1911/96) of organisational life? And, how does a particular scheme of explanation achieve coherence, plausibility and then dominance in the order of things? These are questions that have not been sufficiently addressed or explored in the organisational sense-making literature. One way to understand how organisational sense-making takes place is to think of grammar as an overlaying system of linguistic coding and ordering that isolates selective aspects of experience, directs our attention to these hitherto disparate elements, and promotes the establishment of formal causal relations. Without the aid of grammar we would not be able to isolate phenomena, specify their identities, speculate on causal relationships and logically string arguments together to develop a coherent and plausible account of the world around us. Grammar is, thus, a strict system of rules for punctuating experiences in a way that renders such experiences discrete and hence amenable to
conceptual identification and manipulation. For this reason, causal thinking and hence modern rationality are inextricably linked to the grammatical structure of alphabetic systems of language (McLuhan, 1962; Ong, 1967) and to the Aristotelian logic underpinning Western science (Carter, 1990). Like the effect of Euclidean geometry on our comprehension of the world, grammar superimposes figures on the lexical world and in so doing allows us to conceive of the world in terms defined and specified by a small set of regulating conditions. Logical relations, explanatory coherence and plausibility are thus desired outcomes of this intellectual effort.

All of this, however, takes place within socio-cultural and organizational contexts. Grammars of organising and sense-making are motivated by a need for achieving coherence, consistency and hence legitimacy in our thoughts and actions. But like much of social life such connections have to be continuously enacted, re-enacted and subsequently modified by alternative experiences and insights on an ongoing basis. Over time and given a relatively liberal social existence a proliferation of interpretations, ideologies and perspectives occur. Thus it is not uncommon to find a number of parallel, competing and oftentimes contradictory 'logics' of explanation in operation within a given organisational context. In this paper, we identify three underlying grammars of organisational sense-making for legitimising and justifying business, social and managerial actions and decision-making within the context of a family-owned newspaper called the *Courier*. In the course of its transformation from a traditional community-based understanding of its role as news carrier for the local community to a modern business enterprise several grammatical strands in its discourse could be identified, each in continuing tension with the others. Our paper begins by a critical examination of the relationship between *episteme*, organising grammar, and the legitimacy of knowledge and attempts to show how each socio-cultural epoch is associated with different logics of justification. We then go on to identify and articulate three organizing grammars: the Traditional, the Classical and the Modern to show how each of these serve to provide a legitimate justificatory platform for sense-making and decision-taking in the *Courier*. We examine in some detail the tension-filled co-existences of these three generative grammars and the accompanying narratives produced to justify each of these perspectives within the *Courier*. We end by reflecting on how the study of such underlying grammars of
organising can be productively employed to illuminate the different underlying logics shaping perceptions, sense-making and decision-making in organisations.

**Episteme, Organising Grammar and the Legitimacy of Knowledge**

In his Foreword to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault (1970) makes the interesting point that his intention in that book was to 'reveal a positive unconscious of knowledge' (p. xi, emphasis original): an attempt to restore what underlay but eluded the consciousness of the renaissance, classical and modern eras. Thus, what was common to a variety of disciplines and practices such as alchemy, science, natural history, and economics during each of these periods was that they used the same governing rules to define the objects proper to their study and to form concepts and build theories about them. Such *rules of formation* constitute the underlying grammar of sense-making for a particular epoch or *episteme*. These rules of formation are intended to educate our senses and to cause us to selectively attend to specific aspects of our experiences since the sensory inputs of humans are invariably abundant and overwhelming. Censoring is a fundamental feature of sense-making. In 'making sense' we actively select out certain aspects of our sensory stimuli and select in others thereby creating a legitimate focus of attention. But censoring alone is insufficient since having directed the focus of our attention we also then need to subsequently fix and locate the phenomenal experience so that we can name it examine it and manipulate it as an object of inquiry. This is the task of centering. Through locating and centering, naming and identity-creation then becomes possible. Thus out of the aboriginal 'sensible muchness' that is our primary raw experience, attention carves out and then proceeds to fix and name: 'in the sky "constellations", on the earth "beach", "sea", "cliff", "bushes", "grass"….We say *what* each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstract *whats* are concepts' (James, 1911/96: 50). The manner in which we translate our raw experiences into 'abstract *whats*' is governed by established rules of formation. Without the existence of such rules of formation it would not be possible to isolate specific aspects of our experience and then render them significant and meaningful to us in our everyday life. Each *episteme*, therefore, establishes rules of concept formation that enable us to *harness* our sensory perceptions in order to drive it better to fit our needs and ends. Such rules steer us practically in our everyday life, they bring value into our actions and 'reanimate our wills by making our action turn upon new points of emphasis' (James, 1911/96: 73).
In great part, therefore, the *episteme* of a given epoch or culture organises our sensorium (McLuhan, 1967) in such a way that we are made to attend to some types of stimuli rather than others, by making an issue of certain ones while relatively neglecting other ones. For Foucault (1970), there has been two major discontinuities in the *episteme* of Western culture over the last five hundred years: the transition from the Renaissance to the Classical age beginning from around the middle of the seventeenth and the transition from the Classical to the Modern age beginning from the early nineteenth century. Each *episteme*, the Renaissance, the Classical and the Modern, brings with it a different conception of what it is to *know* and this, in turn, is grounded in each epoch's experience of order.

Thus, in the Renaissance period, things were ordered and hence known through the principle of *resemblance*. Resemblance suggests *likeness* or *similarity* and such likenesses or similarities provided the basis for ordering perceptions and hence understanding of phenomena during the Renaissance period. Knowing through resemblance may take the form of similarity in terms of proximal location in space. Thus, two things regularly found adjacent or close to each other reflect a form of resemblance since being somehow close together physically gives two things a sense of similarity. Living together under one roof, kinship, friends, neighbours on the same street, members of the same village, people from a particular part of the country etc., bear a form of resemblance precisely because their immediacy and physical proximity to each other gives them a sense of collective unity and identity. Such similarities, familiarities and affinities made up the complex of rules for forging knowledge within this period.

Resemblance is also found through *analogy* and through *emulation* which is a kind of reflection or resonance that enables us to associate things that are otherwise remote or appear disconnected from one another. The human heart, for instance, is often thought of as a mechanical 'pump' because of its similarity of function and by thinking thus it enables us to make the connection between things that are not necessarily physically proximate or adjacent to each other. This is how, during the Renaissance the seeds of the aconite plant were often used as a cure for eye diseases just because their appearance was that of 'tiny dark globes seated in white skinlike coverings whose
appearance is much like that of eyelids covering an eye' (Foucault, 1970: 142). Similarly, walnuts were used for wounds of the pericranium because the physical appearance of the walnut resembled the human brain. Analogy is also found in the practice of palmistry where the lines on the palm of the hand are believed to reflect the tendencies, accidents and obstacles a person encounters in the whole fabric of his/her life.

We can therefore see that Renaissance or traditional thought, like much of Eastern thought, relied heavily on the idea of an unending spiral of linked resemblances for its system of knowledge and understanding. On this view, signs observed in nature are no different from human signs since the material world and the symbolic worlds are all thought of as inextricably intertwined. So much so that in this worldview, there is nothing bizarre about Paracelsus's claim that snakes are repelled by chanting certain Greek words (Foucault, 1970: 33). Magic, alchemy, erudition and science are thus placed on par with each other in this Renaissance scheme of things. Hence, 'the resulting conception of knowledge is one that makes no essential distinction between direct observations and reported stories, that takes the form of commentary, and that is the essentially incomplete pursuit of an unending chain of similarities' (Gutting, 1989: 146). Science, alchemy, palmistry and astrology all sat comfortably with one another during this period. Proximity, convenience, analogy and emulation provided the organising grammar for the establishment of knowledge during the Renaissance period.

However, whilst this way of thinking in terms of resemblance was dominant during the Renaissance, it persists in modern times albeit within pockets of social life and within certain organised contexts. For instance, it is not uncommon for the traditional family firm to be run in a paternalistic tradition with the owners treating employees as members of the family. Similarly the more currently fashionable idea of alternative medicines and therapies where a 'holistic' approach is emphasised, relies on affinities and resemblance as their logic of justification rather than on a classical causal logic. Also, it is not uncommon for this logic of resemblance to be traditionally adhered to in other non-Western cultures. For instance, in the East the disease called 'shingles' which is a virus and consists of a band of extremely painful spots on the skin around the waist region, was traditionally interpreted as an internal snake wrapping itself
around its victim and threatening to suffocate the latter. The recommended cure according to Chinese tradition was to 'unravel' the snake by walking backwards around the compound of the house carrying burning joss-sticks!!! Whilst these traditional practices are now disappearing as countries have become more 'Westernised', some aspects of knowing through resemblance remain. Take the traditional Chinese attitude towards the number '8'. In Cantonese especially, when spoken the number has great affinities with the idea of success since it sounds, when uttered, very similar to the Chinese word for 'prosperity'. The term *onomatopoeic* can be used to describe this kind of resemblance and this similar sounding coincidence has led Chinese businessmen to equate the number '8' with good luck and prosperity. The consequence is that in decision-making with regards to purchasing of property, car numbers and so on the preference is for the number '8' or combinations of it. Thus, if one were to spy a car with a number plate containing '8' or '88' or '8888' outside a Chinese restaurant, for instance, it would be a safe bet that that car belonged to the owner of the restaurant. This is just one example of how the logic of resemblance is deployed in social and organisational life. *Feng Shui*, another deeply-rooted Chinese tradition also operated on the basis of resemblance. Feng Shui, which literally means wind and water, is an art of divining how human activities and objects should be located in order to harmonise with the underlying hidden forces of nature. Thus, when the Han Seng bank in Hong Kong experienced a bad patch in its financial trading during the mid-1980s, the Geomancer (i.e., the Feng Shui expert) was consulted and the prescription offered was the demolishing and repositioning of a connecting bridge which linked the Han Seng building to another building because the latter was likened to a dagger piercing into the heart of the Han Seng building. Space does not permit a more detailed treatment of this phenomenon in Chinese business decision-making. Suffice to say, however, that in various parts of the world, and in certain types of established businesses knowledge and recognition through resemblance remains a strong organising grammar in the conduct of affairs and it is particularly exemplified in the smaller family-based business organisation both in the East and West.

With the beginning of the Classical age in the West, however, came the demise of the principle of ordering through resemblance and the replacement of this established system of knowledge by one that emphasised the breaking-up and *analysis* of resemblance and the establishment of causal relations through the principle of identity.
and difference. Now it was not sufficient to merely recognise each phenomenon in terms of their resemblance to other things. Instead, each phenomenon had to be analysed and broken down into its constituent elements and systematically differentiated from others. Naming, representing, classifying and the establishment of causal relations became the key activities of a knowing mind. The overall project of knowledge is now that of achieving an accurate linguistic representation of things that 'places them in a series according to their identities and differences existing among their properties' (Gutting, 1989: 155). Taxonomies, tables and classificatory schemas replaced the idea of resemblance as the basis for knowledge. Collecting, identifying, differentiating and classifying phenomena, and relating causes to effects in a hierarchical scheme of things became the order of the day. As Elsner and Cardinal in their recent book *The Culture of Collecting* write:

'…if classification is the mirror of collective humanity's thoughts and perceptions, then collecting is its material embodiment. Collecting is classification lived, experienced in three dimensions. The history of collecting is thus the narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited' (Elsner, and Cardinal, 1994: 2).

One major consequences of this analytical and taxonomising mind-set was the development of an obsession with the creation of tables, hierarchies and classificatory schemas for representing both nature and the social world and the subsequent articulating of causal relationships linking these otherwise independent phenomena. Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, written in the early eighteenth century provides one of the clearest examples of this taxonomic obsession. In the broader social realm, this same preoccupation was to be found in the work of John Wilkins and Thomas Sprat, both founding members of the Royal Society. For both Sprat and Wilkins classical knowledge is to be based upon pre-established symbols, taxonomies, and hierarchies. Thus, in this scheme of things, 'you do not *call* a thing by its name, which would be arbitrary. No, you *use* the name to designate the thing's location in a taxonomic chart' (Kenner 1987: 87, emphasis original). Through this system of differentiation, classification and representational ordering, Wilkins and Sprat, amongst others, sought to create an exaggeratedly formal and ordered social world which could thereby be more precisely described and analysed and more importantly controlled and manipulated. It is this taxonomic strategy of representation that provides the
leitmotif for the Classical mind-set. Within the terms of management and organisation theory it provides the justificatory impulse for the creation of organisation charts formalising hierarchical relationships and the articulation of clear roles and job descriptions for each and every position in the organisation chart.

This taxonomic impulse, first initiated by Aristotle and rediscovered by the invention of the printing press (McLuhan, 1962; Ong, 1967), precipitated the modern emphasis on what we now call an epistemology of representationalism. The idea that reality can be wholly captured and accurately represented through the use of established terms, categories, concepts and explanatory schemas because the dominant obsession of the classical period. Such an epistemological strategy entails the breaking down, fixing, locating, and naming of all phenomena. Knowing, thus, entails the ability to say what a thing 'is' or what it 'is not' and to be able to explain 'why' things are as they are. Knowledge is therefore predicational judgement in that by identifying what a thing 'is' or what it 'is not' and why this is the case, we fix the focus of our attention and attribute a general property or condition to the object of study. This is deemed to be possible precisely because it is believed that the world has a logical structure and hence lends itself to the grasp of language. All proper knowledge is, therefore, generalisable knowledge and not knowledge of the particular since the particular is always subsumed by the wider predicate term. Thus, "red" and "wine" are not individual "thises", but universal classifications pointing to the original intuition of the individually observed thing' (Carter 1990: 26). They refer to common properties rather than specific experiences. Contrary to the Renaissance period, there can now no longer be an unknown sign since the sign is both the instrument and result of systematic analysis. The function of the sign is to 'represent' and just like a map represents a territory, the sign represents something else in the world since signs are now ontologically separate from the world and exists only in an ideational mental order. More importantly, 'Whether or not a sign happens to resemble what it signifies, it directly represents it in a way that an idea represents its object' (Gutting, 1989: 149). Thus for the Classical age accurate representation and the establishment of tight causal relations became a necessary form of all thought.

There are four aspects that modified the Renaissance conception of knowledge and hence radically reorganised the underlying grammar of sense-making. Firstly, the
unending spiralling hierarchy of analogies and resemblance prevalent during the Renaissance were gradually substituted by the method of analysis. From now on every phenomenon was to be investigated by a method which involved breaking it down into its constituent parts, identifying and naming each part and then examining each of these for its distinctiveness and characteristics based upon a principle of similarity and difference. Accuracy of representation became the dominant priority in this Classical ordering of things. The underlying reasons for grouping similar things together and separating them from others must now be not just through mere convenience, but has to be comprehensively justified. Every claimed resemblance in terms of likeness and similarity must now be subjected to proof. Proof in this instance entails the capacity for systematic discrimination and a comprehensive verification of the properties in terms of identity and difference. This is the second key transformation that the Classical era brought with it in terms of knowledge-creation. Thirdly, not only must similarities and differences be articulated they must now be subjected to measurement and enumeration using some common units so that proper comparison can be made. As Bohm, (1980) noted, what was previously understood in terms of the 'measure of things' has during the Classical and Modern eras degenerated into the mindless 'measurement of things'.

'…among the Ancient Greeks…to keep everything in its right measure was regarded as one of the essentials of a good life…In this regard, measure was not looked on in its modern sense as being primarily some sort of comparison of an object with an external standard or unit. Rather, this latter procedure was regarded as an outward display of a deeper "inner measure"…When something went beyond its proper measure, this meant…that it was inwardly out of harmony…It is thus implied that measure is a form of insight into the essence of everything' (Bohm, 1980: 20-21).

For the Classical period, it was the employment of mathesis, the quantitative, mathematical treatment of reality as well as taxinomia, which dealt with the qualitative ordering of complex nature that enabled proper comparison to be made with a high degree of accuracy and certainty. With this scientific basis for comparison it then becomes possible to discriminate and pass judgement in terms of the true and the good. Analysis, accuracy of representation, proof, comparison and discrimination thus form the underlying grammar of organising and sense-making for the Classical era.
We can see this Classical approach to organisational sense-making being played out through the various techniques and devices used to 'direct', 'control' and 'motivate' staff and through the increasingly more complex systems of accountability that have been installed into institutions and organisations. We have already mentioned the obsession with taxonomies and organisation charts but there are many more common practices that derive from this Classical impulse. For instance, the idea of performance appraisal is based upon the analysis, identification, comparison and discrimination of performance of each individual within the organisation. Reviewing, planning, goal setting and performance-tracking are all recognisably clear elements of this Classical obsession with a system of close/closed control. Proof of performance or otherwise is needed to justify decisions and actions whether it be rewards or otherwise. Similarly, the obsession with the creation of league tables in a variety of organised settings - schools, hospitals, universities, etc., - reflect this need for transparency and accountability of actions and resources. 'Bottom-line' thinking dominates such a set of organisational priorities. We see this system of priorities regularly played out in public and private institutions and organisations at all levels in society.

Finally, within the modern episteme the basic realities have become detached from their signifiers so much so that 'A thing is (now) what it is not because of its place in the ideal classification system but because of…the historical forces buried within them' (Gutting, 1989: 181). It is no longer adequate to know a thing in terms of its formal specification and location in the overarching scheme of things. Modernity is thus associated not so much with the triumph of representation as in the Classical era but in the decline and failure of representation. Modernism represents the beginning of that moment of disillusionment that arises from a realisation of the impossibility of accurate representation because of the uncontrolled proliferation of competing regimes of signification (Lash, 1990). Modernism as Lash argues problematizes representations and hence destabilizes the meanings of the latter. He writes:

'If all the objects of significance in the social world were divided up into those which were real and those which were representations...history could be seen in terms of an increasing proportion of those objects which are representations. On this account, to a certain point in historical time, representations came to constitute a sufficient proportion of all objects, so that they came to be taken seriously in all their opacity and complexity. This point would be the advent of
modernism. If at a later historical point in time the pervasiveness of representations increased to a point at which real objects began to be challenged for their hegemony as objects of social significance, what might come to be problematized would be, no longer representations, but the status of the real itself. This would be the point at which postmodernization would begin to set in' (Lash, 1990: 15).

In other words, contrary to popular misunderstandings, modernism problematizes representations whilst postmodernism problematizes the notion of reality itself. In modernity already, representations are no longer unquestioned, self-justifying starting points. They do not command sufficient unitary justification for action and decision. What the modern era, with its continued emphasis on individuation, differentiation, specialization, rationalization, control and discrimination unwittingly gave rise to is the proliferation of alternative and competing representations and the consequent problem of interpretation. Meanings are no longer transparent and self-evident. Instead actions and intentions have become more opaque and subjected to alternative motives and understandings. Deeper unconscious forces, historical embeddedness and ulterior motives that are difficult to empirically verify have to be increasingly countenanced as legitimate explanations. Pluralism and the emergence of conflicting realities became the signature theme of this modern period. A degree of suspicion, cynicism and disillusionment sets in as regimes of representation compete with each other for an ideological foothold in the collective psyche of the developed West.

Whilst Foucault (1970) discusses these epistemological transformations in terms of epistemes, that are more or less logically incommensurable it would be fair to say that in practice contradictory though they appear, they nevertheless coexist as a multi-layered dimension of social reality. The displacement of one episteme by another is by no means ever comprehensive or complete. Thus, even now in the 21st century there is clear evidence of social and organisational practices that have been ordered around the principle of resemblance where the organising grammar of adjacency, proximity, emulation and analogy remain very much alive even with the dominance of the Classical and Modern attitudes. Each of the three cultural attitudes previously elucidated, the Renaissance (which we will call here the Traditional), the Classical and the Modern, are to be found in various degrees in the modern-day organisation and it is to their empirical manifestation that we now turn.
The Case of the Courier

In this section, we examine the narratives that are constructed and justified and the underlying organising grammars involved as employees struggle to cope with and make sense of the changes taking place in a 160-year-old newspaper production and publishing company, the Courier. The material presented here is part of a wider study carried out by one of the authors in which 100 interviews with employees of the newspaper company (past and present) took place over a six-year period (see O’Leary, 2003 for a further discussion of the stories told by employees of the Courier). For the purposes of this paper we have identified three underlying organising grammars at the Courier: the Traditional associated with a high degree of organisational paternalism that emphasises a logic of resemblances and that relies on proximity, emulation, sympathy and assimilation; the Classical with its emphasis on proof, profits, performance and survival; and the Modern with its emphasis on cynicism, disillusionment and apathy. The narratives demonstrate different ways of thinking about organisational life variously emphasizing integration of family and community, competition and success, and injustice and deception.

The Traditional Grammar of Organisational Sense-making

The Courier has operated for many years as a traditional family-owned company, more of an institution for the local community than a profit-making enterprise. In this regard, the Courier reflected and emulated the concerns of the community. Older employees, particularly former printers and journalists who have worked in the newspaper for 15 years or more displayed a high degree of loyalty and were active in supporting the traditional paternalistic approach to management. They spoke with some nostalgia about their experience with the Courier:

Yes, I came in as a trainee compositor, as an indentured apprentice, as all apprentices were. There was a legal document between my parents and the company – it’s a pity that I don’t have a copy of it here to show you because it’s very interesting, it’s a very funny document. It forbids me visiting alehouses, play houses and taverns! It is something that is worthy of the archives! It is very archaic but in a sense it did set the tone for a type of discipline that was expected….. I come from a very, I suppose, Catholic background in the extended sense. It was a liberal household, but yet

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1 The identity of the newspaper company, as well as the identity of employees who were kind enough to give very honest accounts of working life in their organization, is being protected and therefore the pseudonym ‘the Courier’ is used throughout this paper.
discipline was the order of the day. When you were told to do something, it was only once. This document was only an extension of home. It was like as if I had passed from my parents to the Courier …(Owner) became like a father figure to me.

The workplace for these older employees was an extension of home and the owners of the Courier assumed the role of father-figures so much so that there is a seamless continuity from home to work. The roles/rules of home resembled the roles/rules at work. It also has to be emphasised that the practice of apprenticeship in particular encapsulates the notion of resemblance because it is a structured relationship in which the apprentice learns to emulate the master so that he or she can then be subsequently assimilated into the craft tradition. These employees conceived of the organisation in terms resembling a family where the owner is at once, authoritative and protective. Control and discipline are unquestioningly accepted, including control over editorial decisions which one might expect to be made by the editor:

If senior management didn’t like a story, it was quashed. There was a story about a pilot boat that crashed in the harbour but since [Owner] was interested in boating and had a boat below there in the harbour, he didn’t like the story and it wasn’t written about.

Here, the personal interest of the owner overrode the editorial decision because as a 'father-figure' it was considered perfectly acceptable for him to decide what went into the papers and what did not. So news was only included if it suited the interests of the family that owned the Courier and the community that it served. Worthy news that was sympathetic to the cause of the family and community was assimilated and reported whilst that which was viewed as 'negative' was isolated and dismissed. Partiality and selectivity through sympathy, affinity, resemblance and incorporation provided the basis for decision-making in the presentation of news. This approach to news reporting is further exemplified by a story told by a retired editor explaining the difference between himself and his replacement. On this occasion, it is the editor who makes the decision although he abided by the established tradition of commitment to family and community:

When I was editor, as I was a family man myself, people would often come to my house to plead with me not to run a story which would ruin them. There was this one time when a neighbour in the council houses nearby called to the house and my wife was the only one home at the time. She let the woman in,
who knelt on the floor and pleaded with her to ask me not to allow a story
about her husband get into the paper.

Her husband had bought bed linen and mattresses from another man on the
estate and they turned out to be stolen. The husband was being charged with
handling stolen goods. His job as a baker, and his pension, would be taken
from him if the story got into the papers. My wife said she’d have a word with
me. The woman called again when I was home and again knelt on the floor,
just next to where you are sitting now, crying and pleading. I comforted her
and said I’d see what I could do.

I went into work the next day and asked if there was anything interesting
going on in the courts. “Only one story,” said the reporter who was covering
the court cases. “Oh, what is it?” I asked innocently. “It’s a case of a guy
handling stolen property – he got a warning and a fine.” “Don’t bother with
it,” I said. “What are you talking about?” asked the reporter, “this is a great
story – it’s my day’s work and I’m doing it.” “Don’t do it!” I insisted. “I’m
doing it!” shouted the reporter. “OK, do it.” I went back to my desk and
eventually the reporter came over with his copy and I just thanked him and
tore it up. The reporter went mad and danced in front of me. There was an
awful scene but I couldn’t let that man lose his job – he did have a family after
all. Of course, they’d run the story if it happened today. The new editor, you
see, he’s not married!

This story places the newspaper company firmly within the community and the
family. In the opening scene, it is the wives who appear, one pleading on behalf of her
husband and the other agreeing to lobby her husband. The husband and editor places
his neighbour’s family ahead of an “easy” news story. Employees’ families (as well as
the wider community) are taken into account in decisions which affect the work
organisation. It is suggested that the new editor being less integrated into the local
community had different values, less regard for the local context, and hence would
have printed the story regardless of its consequences.

Such partiality in decision-making has also its own upsides as the following story told
by a company accountant with a long history in the organisation, illustrates.

There’s a poor fellow there now who died last week. I’ll always remember he
was married twice. But the first girl he married had a life-threatening disease
before he married her, but he married her anyway. And she was dying, and she
had always wanted a brass bed; and so the family [who owned the Courier]
lent him the money to buy the brass bed.
The idea that a business can dip into its own accounts to lend money to an employee for what is clearly more of an aspirational ideal than a dire physical hardship reflects the power of a tradition to *assimilate* the personal concerns of the staff into the company business thereby treating employees like members of an extended family. This family atmosphere with its emphasis on caring creates a sense of security and belonging for employees and in turn, a great loyalty to the organisation as well as a sense of continuity that arises from the *Courier* employing different generations of the one family. As Foucault (1970) writes of this grammar of organising that relies on the logic of resemblance:

'sympathy is not content to spring from a single contact…it excites of the world to movement and can draw even the most distant of them together...Sympathy is an instance of the *Same* so strong and so insistent…it has the… power of *assimilating*, of rendering things identical to one another, of mingling them' (Foucault, 1970: 23).

Familiarity and partiality also form the basis of recruitment and selection in a paternalistic organization, as you are likely to get a job in the *Courier* only if you already have family members working there. The *Courier*, it is maintained is “littered with families” not just in the sense of the Courier being family-owned but in the practice of employing relatives of employees:

By employing members of the same family you created a sense of loyalty, a perpetuity ... if you did something wrong at work it would catch up with you at home ... There is a greater sense of responsibility when you are part of a family tradition ... I was born in the shadow of the gates of the *Courier* – it’s in my blood, it’s what I do! To new people coming in today what does the *Courier* mean? It means a job; it means that they can pay the mortgage. That’s all.

Loyalty can be best understood as a deep feeling of *sameness* and emotional *proximity* and this sense of sameness is also reinforced by a physical proximity: (I was born in the shadow of the gates of the *Courier*) and hence a sense of a blood-bond as well as common destiny: (it's in my blood, its what I do!). This traditional view of organisational life, with its emphasis on resemblance through proximity and closeness, hierarchical order, discipline, generosity, loyalty and belonging, coexists in tension with a Classical view that seeks a more professional, performance-oriented and profit-focussed set of outcomes.
Events such as increased competition, declining sales of core products and so forth have perpetuated a focus on profit at the Courier and a survival strategy which includes expansion into a national market. The fifth generation family members as well as non-family directors and new professionals who have recently joined the Courier (including a new editor) described this as a ruthless management philosophy where sentimentality and nepotism had to be replaced by a more professional attitude. It was argued that the Courier would have to move forward through a number of key changes including cost-cutting through redundancy, the introduction a new salary structure, the employment of professionals from outside the organization in key positions in marketing and editorial, and the creation of a better product which would sell as a national newspaper. This new emphasis reflects the mentality of the Classical mindset. For, as we recall, Classical thought revolves around the establishment of individual identities, their differentiation and classification into categories and their evaluation in terms of causal links. The idea of 'cost-cutting' is predicated on the ability to detect anomalies through comparison and proof of inefficiencies. The idea of 'redundancy' is predicated upon the ability to identify, differentiate, isolate and remove poor performers much like the way one would remove a malfunctioning or worn out part from a machine. The emphasis is on analysis: of profitability of the business; of poor performing staff; of better fit between the job and the person recruited; of the environment in terms of opportunities and threats; of better and more lucrative markets to operate in, and so on. The whole culture of the organisation is re-oriented towards performance, profits and progress:

The whole organization has changed enormously. It has gone from being a dull, staid, provincial – very provincial – organisation to a very dynamic one. Change is at the centre of the philosophy of the Courier now.

Improving the production process and the distribution are all important...Before there were some days when we produced wonderful papers, there were other days when they were awful....Our production, I believe, now is excellent and consistently excellent. Our distribution, in other words the availability of the bloody thing, is almost acceptable....

Now it’s a business, run like a business, that’s the way it is... It’s aggressive. It is aggressive in that it beats people up and it is aggressive in setting targets and achievement. But I love my job. I love everything I do. There are no illusions about it being a happy place. It’s a snake pit.
This aggressive bottom-line focused operation with its emphasis on performance and responding to market expectations and the deliberate taking of action accordingly resulted in the creation of a more professional organisation structure and the specification of key roles within the business. The introduction of job titles and descriptions such as Human Resource Manager and Newspaper Sales and Marketing Manager as well as the institution of a system of performance appraisals and accountability replaced the older way of conducting operations. The new CEO (as opposed to the previous Director) suggested that his key task was to “put the right people in the right places” (i.e., the appropriate classification and categorisation of each individual and their proper 'fit' within the organisation):

When I took over, I set about putting the right people into the right places. Am, [previous Director] is a very nice guy….He is a gentle guy with a big heart and he never liked delivering bad news. And he spent a lot of time with regard to the people ... but he was never one to look at people and to analyse their characters and see if they were the right people for the job.

'He was never one to look at people and to analyse their characters…' suggests a Traditional mentality where like-mindedness, was appreciated, assimilated and encouraged. There was little effort put in to identify, compare and discriminate between better and worse performing members of staff.

As well as the emphasis on measurement, comparison and control, the Classical grammar is also associated with the creation of a certain sense of what 'proper' behaviour constitutes. Cleanliness and personal decorum became an important aspect of workplace behaviour. The sanitization of the workplace is well illustrated in stories that relate to the physicality of work.

Well it got cleaner! I used to arrive home everyday absolutely filthy after dealing with hot metal and graphite…..

They won’t allow the smell of alcohol, smoke or anything. And it’s things like that they are interested in, not the quality of work. They came out one day with this clean desk policy. For Christ’ sake. It’s crazy…. We seem to be virtually sanitized now!

The Classical argument is that drinking, gambling and other addictive behaviour make the organisation less productive, destroy lives and cost the organisation a lot of
money. The *Courier* is a profit-making organization, not a charity or a rest home for those with addictions. The idea that journalists are creative people who need alcohol and other addictive substances to fuel their creativity was no longer acceptable.

Another key change involves the introduction of a new salary structure which meant new reporters entering the *Courier* earned significantly less than workers who had been there for a few years. Whilst acknowledging that this might seem unfair to the new employees, it was argued as necessary for cost control since the older employees were unable to leave even if they disliked their jobs as they were not likely to receive the same high wages in any other newspaper company. This aggressive profit-focused view with its emphasis on productivity, professionalism and progression has opposition not only from older workers but also from newly recruited journalists who were in temporary employment in the *Courier* and who describe themselves as ‘the moral opposition’ to the profiteering ways of management.

*The Modern Grammar of Organisational Sense-making*

The Modern mentality as we recall is characterised by a situation in which signifiers have become loosened and detached from reality itself. Modernity is a reflection of the realisation that signs are problematic and do not straightforwardly represent what they supposedly stand for. What is said and what is done are no longer congruent with each other so much so that actions and intentions are by no means transparent and unequivocal. Interpretation and reading beneath the surface of things is required. One consequence of this detachment of the sign from reality is the emergence of suspicion, cynicism and disillusionment since things can no longer be taken as they appear. What is needed for a full comprehension is the excavating of the 'historical forces buried within' (Gutting, 1989: 181).

As a result of the shift in emphasis from a Traditional to a Classical approach to business management, the *Courier* took on a number of new contract and free-lance reporters who appeared to mistrust management and who took it on themselves to expose what they saw as the injustice and incompetence in the workplace. This was done through telling humorous tales that publicised the weaknesses of management as well as self-deprecatory stories which illustrated the pathetic existence of the junior reporters themselves and the lack of respect for journalism shown by management in
the *Courier*. One of these temporary employees described the following key event that changed his attitudes towards the organization:

I believed that this place stood for compassion, honesty and loyalty … but after the bank holiday pay fiasco, I don’t think I really care about the place anymore … after Easter, having as usual invoiced for double days for three bank holidays … I discovered we hadn’t been paid and that we weren’t going to be …

The above incident, which recalls a refusal by management to pay extra for working on bank-holidays, was used to illustrate the underhand practices of the *Courier*, contrary to the new-styled claims of transparency and professionalism. Through such decisions, the *Courier* was perceived to display a lack of honesty, fairness, and sincerity and that, therefore, the management of the *Courier* had to be regarded with suspicion in terms of their underlying motives. The disgruntled junior reporters employed cynical narratives to air their disillusionment about the organisation. For example, one reporter told the following story:

Am, my mother died in January and I just took off and I was absent for about three or four weeks. But the boss in my department, he paid me for the first three weeks I was away, which is pure paternalistic society. It is purely the view that ‘we’ll look after you in times of hardship’. That's a pure sign of a paternalistic organization….

In the above account, the reporter initially gave the impression that the *Courier* had acted sympathetically to his cause. However, he subsequently turned the story around from apparent praise to cynicism:

…but they use that to mask the fact that if they were a proper decent company who employed people in a fair manner, you would have holidays - you could take four weeks holidays. So they are able to slip back one mode to another to disguise the shortcomings, you know. So it's like the flip of a switch you know.

What first appeared to be an act of generosity on the part of management - to pay an employee who takes time off to grieve - was in fact interpreted as a cover-up because the young reporter, like many others in the Courier, was appointed on a freelance basis and therefore his holiday entitlements had been conveniently overlooked by the company. What initially appeared as an act of paternalism was perceived by the reporter as a means “to disguise the shortcomings” at the *Courier*. Bakhtin (1984)
terms this method of narration 'heteroglossia': a differentiated form of speech which is intended to stratify assertions in a 'double-voiced' manner such that it leaves a loophole for the speaker to alter the final meaning of his/her words. One example that Bakhtin gives is from the *Underground Man*:

'I happened to look at myself in the mirror. My harassed face struck me as extremely revolting, pale, spiteful, nasty, with dishevelled hair….

"No matter, I am glad of it", I thought; "I am glad that I shall seem revolting to (Liza); I like that"' (Bakhtin, 1984: 236).

Here, as Bakhtin demonstrates, the initial impression is one of the Underground Man's concern about his own appearance but he leaves a narrative loophole to allow himself to subsequently reverse that sentiment from a negative to a positive one. This is the nature of the double-voicedness of heteroglotic discourse. Thus, the junior reporter, on the surface seems initially appreciative of the act of compassion displayed by the organisation. However, his reversal to suggest that paying him during this period of bereavement was a way of deflecting attention from questions being raised about the entitlement of free-lance reporters displays the cynicism with which he views company decisions.

Another narrative feature widely employed by these junior reporters was humorous self-deprecation.

… they are introducing a dress code into the paper and I don’t know what I am going to do because at the moment I earn so little that my personal wardrobe isn’t very extensive … only two of my shirts have collars so wearing a tie isn’t a possibility and I only have the one pair of trousers which I have been wearing for the past two weeks, they have to go to the dry-cleaners soon.

The above story was told in irony and jest and with a degree of sarcasm especially as it was later admitted that no such dress code was to be introduced but the story served as a humorous way to illustrate the poor salary of the young reporter. Similarly, the following story was told to illustrate the difficult life of the young newspaper reporter:

Yeah. It's just - we are sent out to do extremely shitty jobs. Like - dress up as Oscar Wilde, get onto public transport, and recite poetry. Don't laugh - I had to do that! Am, there is a guy in there who has to go around doing Sambo Boy - he has to dress up as James Bond and eat a sandwich. That's
just for a picture - the idea is that the public don't know that it is someone from the newspaper. There's a girl in the office, who a couple of weeks ago, had to dress up as a Frenchman - you know, tash, garlic the whole works. And it's just nonsensical really - we are news reporters, that is not news, that is features.

The junior reporters although they joked about some of the ridiculous tasks they were asked to accomplish, often got their own back on management by telling humorous tales that exposed the incompetence and inefficiency of management in the workplace. The following incident, recalled with some glee by a sub-editor, illustrates the rewards offered to sales staff, in this case because of their incompetence:

If you look at the people who are being treated well - take tele-sales for example - they added up all their totals for what they sold in a certain month. And they put in one zero too much so their boss said 'brilliant, well done, great work' and arranged for a bottle of champagne to be sent to all of their houses before they came to work on Monday morning. He didn’t wait until they got into work. Oh no, they got the champagne at home. Later on in the week, they admitted 'Oh dear, we added it up wrongly.' You know so ...If we do something good we wouldn't even get to go for a pint, you know.

The reporters believed that in the new professional organization, the contribution of staff in marketing and sales were more highly regarded than the contribution of editorial staff. The above incident was recalled to make the point that this respect was misplaced. Mockery was often used by these junior reporters to expose what they perceived as the inefficiencies and mistakes made by management. They point, for instance, to the deliberate move from being a local to a national newspaper which had been disappointing in terms of newspaper sales. One story described an incident, which occurred when the CEO was invited to give a talk on family business:

Some man in the audience jumped up and asked about the new Courier advertisement (the one with a man hanging from a crane, something about gripping news.) The man in the audience asked if that was the editor hanging on by the skin of his teeth. Shortly afterwards he left the company.

The above account illustrated what the reporters perceived as the “fall from grace” of the editor who launched the national newspaper. It was subsequently admitted that this story was actually a fabrication but that it was one which made the point for the junior reporters. The injustice felt by the junior reporters has resulted in cynicism,
disillusionment, and a desire to expose the incompetence of management and to refute the notion that the *Courier* is a professional, national newspaper. The often-humorous stories of temporary reporters in the *Courier*, express the belief that in the case of the *Courier* “profits are dirty and profits are dear”.

**Concluding Remarks**

Organisational sense-making takes place within the context of established rules of formation that constitute the underlying *grammar* for meaning-making. Grammar is a system of conventionalised social coding and ordering that structure our consciousness, perception and reflection. It organises our sensorium, orients our perception, and educates our attention. It provides a common basis for isolating specific aspects of our lived experiences and for rendering them significant and meaningful to us in our everyday life. Such rules of formation steer us practically in our daily lives by giving focus to our awareness and value to our actions and by making such actions turn on what is perceived to be significant points of emphasis.

In this paper we have attempted to draw from a variety of theoretical sources to throw important light on what is not an uncommon organisational situation in which the pressures for change and shifting perceptions and priorities have created a degree of conflicting tensions and contradiction within organisational life. Foucault's three *epistemes*, whilst notionally related to epochal mentalities and whilst seemingly *logically* incommensurable can nonetheless be productively used to contrast the different underlying grammars and hence logics of justification shaping perceptions, sense-making and decision-making in organisations. For in the world of practice logical incommensurability of perspectives is not, in and of itself, a barrier in the working out of organisational life. Social life is inherently multi-tiered and deeply laden with contradictions. That of itself does not prevent decisive action from taking place. Instead, what we can see is that strategies of justification and sense-making are formulated 'on the hoof' so to speak. They draw freely from three distinct grammars of discursive formation: The Traditional with its emphasis on resemblance through proximity, sympathy and affinity that provided a logic relating to paternalism, loyalty and community; The Classical with its emphasis on analysis, transparency, proof, comparison and discrimination; and the Modern with its cynicism and disillusionment and that is accompanied by the development of more subtle forms of discourse.
including self-deprecation and the kind of 'double-voicedness' that seem to characterise the junior reporter's accounts of the going-ons in the Courier. This rich panoply of organisational meaning-making strategies that we have attempted to capture represents the consequence of the tension-filled juxtaposition of competing grammars of sense-making that is continually ongoing in organisational life. In many ways this is nothing exceptional for that is what actually goes on in the 'real' world of organisational life. It is our hope that the approach that we have adopted here can be further developed to show the richness of insights that can be gained through a more sensitive appreciation of the subtle and nuanced character of human interactions.
References


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