

30 AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONAL EMERGENCE: The Tripartite Domains of Organizational Discourse and the Servitization of IBM

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from 21 years of discourse to examine a narrative about IBM's transition to a service-oriented company. Covering three leadership eras during a period of sweeping change for IBM and the information technology industry, this discourse, found in the IBM Corporation's annual reports, illustrates the emergence of policy, technology, and business models in one of the largest and most influential IT companies in the world. Our purpose in drawing from these texts is twofold: (1) to provide a more

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thorough discussion of the notion of “emergence” in IT organizational settings, and (2) to introduce a fuller process model of how emergence is manifest in organizational discourse than is currently present.

In much of the information systems literature, the term *emergence* has been informally used in describing organizational contexts and the process of IS development (Markus and Robey 1988; Orlikowski 1996; Pfeffer and Leblebici, 1977). In three papers, Truex and his colleagues formally describe and situate a theory of emergence in the discourse on ISD methods (Truex and Baskerville 1998, Truex, Baskerville, and Klein 1999; Truex, Baskerville, and Travis 2000). They liken ISD to “emergent grammars” in a linguistic system. However, they stop short of developing a full epistemology of the notion and provide little more than analogical and descriptive examples grounded in linguist Paul Hopper’s (1987, 1988) emergent grammar hypothesis. The incomplete development of the epistemology and an ontology of the emergence construct has proven problematic for scholars attempting to apply emergence theory in practice (Bello et al. 2002). While researchers or practitioners might find the idea of emergent organizations inviting, without descriptive and explanatory models, the concept is difficult to use in the practice or study of information systems. Accordingly, this paper seeks to contribute to the development of a theory of emergence.

We draw from the organizational communication and organizational discourse literature. In a subset of this community, scholars have advanced theories on the nature of organization as a discursive construction. For them, discourse is the very foundation on which “organization” is built (Fairhurst and Putnam 2004; Heracleous 2006; Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Taylor and Robichaud 2004; Taylor and Van Every 2000). Using this meta-theoretical framework, we explore how emergence arises through an examination of IBM’s annual reports and industry-level discourses, which were, in turn, influenced in part by the IBM declarations and subsequent behavioral changes.

We introduce a new process model of organizational emergence by extending and addressing shortcomings in a set of current perspectives in the literature. The tripartite domain model identifies three domains—context, task, and negotiation-at-hand—as integral components of any concrete occurrence of discourse. To test its efficacy, we apply the tripartite domain model *post hoc* to a longitudinal set of IBM Corporation data. The tripartite domain model provides a lens to examine the servitization of IBM and, in the process, illustrates the emergent discourse on the notion of “service” and on the evolution of the meaning of “customer” in the IBM dataset.

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