

Imaging the Organization

Language Use in Organizational Identity Claims

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This article investigates the cognitive linguistic processes involved in organizational identity construction through language-based identity claims. The organizational imaging process constructs an organization's identity in relation to a system of positively and negatively valued conceptual categories. It involves using language to establish a classification scheme and to define the organization within this scheme. The authors develop a framework for identifying these cognitive linguistic processes based on a grounded-theory study of language use in corporate mission statements. Their findings contribute to a deeper understanding of language's role in organizational identity construction.

Keywords: *categorization; cognitive linguistics; identity; identity claims; language; organizational image*

The concept of organizational identity has acquired increasing prominence in organization literature over the past 2 decades as researchers have investigated the role of identity in a variety of different organizational phenomena. Research has linked a positive organizational identity to members' self-concept (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), cooperation (Tyler, 1999), commitment (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997), and identification with the organization (Carroll, 1995; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Perceptions of organizational identity can also influence how members interpret and adapt to organizational change (Beech & Johnson, 2005; Ford & Ford, 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996) or corporate restructuring (Corley & Gioia, 2004). More generally, organizational identity perceptions can influence organizational performance because

Authors' Note: We thank editor Dorothy Winsor, managing editor Lori Peterson, and the two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

they influence how external constituents evaluate an organization's legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), which in turn affects its ability to access needed human and material resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

Early conceptions of organizational identity tended toward an essentialist view that characterized organizations as possessing sets of central, distinctive, and enduring properties or attributes (Albert & Whetten, 1985). But recent research treats organizational identity as a mental construct or image reflecting audience perceptions about an organization's properties or attributes rather than as a set of attributes inherent to an organization, recognizing the instability and heterogeneity of these perceptions (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Glynn, 2000). From this standpoint, organizations can have multiple, dynamically changing identities depending on the perspective taken (Harrison, 2000; Pratt & Foreman, 2000), and researchers attempting to account for diverse audience perceptions have proposed several closely related constructs, such as collective identity, perceived organizational identity, reputation, and construed external image (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Dutton et al., 1994; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Porter, 2001; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998).

Because identity perceptions are malleable and organizations have vested interests in establishing and maintaining positive identities, internal and external constituents engage in impression-management activities, marketing communication, rhetoric, and other forms of symbolic action to influence audience perceptions (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Burke, 1989; Eccles, Nohria, & Berkley, 1992; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Ginzler, Kramer, & Sutton, 1992; Goffman, 1959; Pfeffer, 1981; Sutton & Callahan, 1987). Internal and external constituents articulate language-based "identity claims" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) that define the organization for various audiences and purposes—statements that may be mutually "compatible, complementary, unrelated, or even contradictory" (Albert & Whetten, 1985, pp. 267-268). Identity claims include statements made on behalf of an organization by official spokespersons (e.g., letters to shareholders in corporate annual reports, advertisements, public relations announcements, corporate mission statements) and a wide variety of other formal or informal statements authored by various stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, industry competitors, market analysts, media commentators, etc.). Collectively, identity claims that articulate different conceptions of an organization socially construct its identity for specific stakeholder audiences in specific contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Despite the prevalence of organizational identity claims and their potential influence on stakeholder behavior and organizational performance, little is known about how these identity claims function to construct organizational

identity or to influence stakeholders' perceptions about an organization. A few studies have investigated the rhetorical use of language in constructing organizational identities in particular contexts. Cheney (1991) examined how bishops of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church constructed a position statement on nuclear arms. Drawing on Burke's (1989) use of *identification*, Cheney studied the way the bishops, in struggling to manage multiple conflicting organizational identities, used ambiguous language to construct a statement designed to satisfy the diverse expectations of key stakeholders. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) studied business-school responses to poor reputation rankings that threatened official identity claims. And Coupland and Brown (2004) described four e-mails posted to a Royal Dutch/Shell Web site that articulated opposing versions of the company's identity.

Rather than focusing on the content of particular identities in specific contexts, this article investigates the generic cognitive linguistic processes involved in constructing organizational identity through language-based identity claims. As mental images, organizational identities are conceptual representations of organizations. We use a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1968) study of language use in corporate mission statements to investigate the cognitive linguistic processes through which identity claims convey such images. Our analysis assumes a fundamental three-way relationship between identity, language, and cognitive processes of categorization. Drawing on research in cognitive linguistics and in social psychology, we argue that organizational identity refers to an organization's classification into social and conceptual categories, and we investigate how language is used in identity claims to construct organizational identity through cognitive processes of categorization. Essentially we argue that the language of an organizational identity claim sets up a system of conceptual and social categories, defining the organization in relation to this classification scheme. We show, however, that such identity claims do much more than simply classify organizations as members of conventional, institutionalized social or industrial categories. An identity claim establishes an idiosyncratic system of value-laden categories; positions the organization positively or negatively within these categories; projects images of identity movement and transformation; constructs past, present, and future identities; and defines the organization in terms of categories reflecting its actions and interactions with other individuals or organizations whose identities are also constructed through the identity claim. We use the term *imaging* here to refer collectively to the cognitive linguistic processes involved.

This article contributes theoretically and methodologically to the study of organizational identity and its effects. Theoretically, our mission-statement analysis identifies various cognitive linguistic processes involved

in organizational imaging. We need to understand these underlying cognitive and linguistic processes for at least two reasons: first, because of the relevance of identity to organizational performance and the prevalence of attempts by constituents to influence others' perceptions of organizational identity and second, because such an understanding can be applied by both those who manage the identities of organizations to particular ends and those who analyze critically the imaging strategies of others. Methodologically, our investigation of the imaging process incorporates a method of analyzing identity claims that we developed to coincide with the preceding assumption that identity, categorization, and language are interdependent. Although developed to analyze corporate mission statements, the method is generalizable and can be applied to other texts. A theoretically grounded method of investigating identity construction through texts is widely applicable in discourse analyses invoking the concept of identity.

In the following sections, first we review and extend theoretical arguments on the relationship between identity, categorization, and language. Next we present the findings of our analysis of corporate mission statements, illustrating how language is used in identity claims to image organizational identity in relation to systems of conceptual and social categories. Then we conclude with a discussion on the dynamic nature of the organizational imaging process and the implications of our findings for further research.

Identity Construction: Using Language for Categorization

The relationship between identity, language, and cognitive processes of categorization is complex, and a full review of the literature is beyond the scope of this article. Instead we summarize work that is most relevant to our objectives here, including psychological arguments about the relationship between identity and categorization and cognitive linguistic research relating language to categorization. In reviewing this work, we describe the findings of prior research and adapt these findings to advance our own theoretical argument.

Identity and Categorization

The relationship between identity and categorization processes is well established in social psychology literature in which the primary focus of attention is at the individual and group levels of analysis. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975) proposes that individuals'

identity is related to their membership in social categories or groups. In early versions of this theory, *social identity* was defined as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292) whereas *personal identity* was defined in terms of an individual’s presumed possession of idiosyncratic personal attributes (Turner, 1999). This version later evolved into a self-categorization theory (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1985, 1999) that distinguished between social and personal identity through different levels of abstraction of social categories. For example, a person might self-categorize as a scientist and a biologist, with the former level emphasizing social identity, based on the person’s similarity to other scientists, and the latter, less abstract level emphasizing personal identity, based on the person’s differences from other scientists who are not biologists (Turner, 1999).

But this evolution from an attribute-based to a category-based conception of individual identity may represent more of a change in description than a substantive change in theoretical approach because, as Abrams (1999) suggested, “the distinction between categories and attributes may itself be highly mutable” (p. 308). And, as the scientist-biologist example illustrates, “a category at one level of abstraction can constitute an attribute in relation to a higher level of abstraction” (p. 208). More significant, “the determination of which features are categorical and which are attributes is potentially indeterminate. . . . (W)hether a person is an artistic (attribute) athlete (category) or an athletic (attribute) artist (category) depends on the comparative context” (pp. 208-209). Thus, personal attributes amount to dimensions for categorizing a person, which suggests that the distinction between personal and social identity represents something of a false dichotomy; that is, identifying an individual based on an attribute (e.g., artistic) is analytically equivalent to placing the person in a hypothetical social category for which membership is based on possessing that attribute (i.e., artists), so any attribute-based identification amounts to a social categorization.

The analytical equivalence of personal attributes and social categories has important implications for understanding the identity-construction process. First, although social psychologists have focused almost exclusively on recognizable social groups as a basis for self-categorization, theory does not support making such groups the only relevant basis for self-categorization in identity construction. Any type of conceptual category could serve as the basis for identity categorization. Thus, if an organization defined itself as innovative, observers might interpret this label as referring to an inherent attribute of the organization, but the label also implicitly relegates the organization as a member of the social category of innovative organizations.

Analytically, therefore, all identity categories can be interpreted as social categories whether or not they refer to a recognizable social group.

Second, because attributes and categories are analytically equivalent, researchers may be more productive in investigating the generic categorization processes involved in constructing identity than in attempting to determine the specific attributes presumed to constitute a particular individual's or organization's identity (Abrams, 1999). Researchers attempting to identify an organization's central, distinctive, and enduring properties (Albert & Whetten, 1985) are likely to be frustrated by the fact that such characteristics can be flexibly interpreted as either inherent attributes or context-dependent social classifications; that is, the meaning of the specific contents of identity will vary substantially with context, depending on the perspective from which identity claims are constructed, the perceived target audience of identity claims, and so on. The structural relationships between attributes and categories used to identify an organization are also highly variable, with each identity claim defining the organization in relation to its author's own idiosyncratic classification scheme.

The notion that organizations possess central, distinctive, and enduring attributes (Albert & Whetten, 1985) is based on an essentialist ontology that has long been criticized by researchers. Wittgenstein's (1958) seminal critique of the assumptions underlying essentialism is particularly well known. Using the example of games, he argued that there is no set of essential attributes common to all of the things we refer to as games. He concluded that attempts to point to such essential attributes are illusory and that people attempting to understand the meaning of words should instead examine how people construct and convey meaning through the use of words in specific contexts (Rorty, 1979). Does Wittgenstein's conclusion about the lack of a set of essential attributes possessed by all members of a category such as games necessarily imply that a particular organization (or a particular game for that matter) can possess no identifiable essential attributes? After all, an organizational identity is presumed to define the attributes of a single organization, not those of a category of organizations. But if categories and the attributes possessed by the objects contained within categories are fundamentally equivalent, then defining an organization based on its presumed possession of a certain attribute amounts to placing the organization in a hypothetical category for which membership is based on the possession of that attribute. By thus defining a category of organizations, a researcher would face the same problem examined by Wittgenstein: identifying the common attributes possessed by all of the organizations in this hypothetical category. Of course, the organizations in this category possess one attribute in common—the attribute

on which the category was defined in the first place. But that simply begs the question of the meaning of that attribute: How are we to determine whether an organization possesses that attribute? This question is identical to the question of identifying a conclusive set of subattributes shared by all of the organizations possessing this attribute, which Wittgenstein's argument refutes.

In general, then, research findings that describe presumed structural and semantic properties of an organization's identity in a particular context are unlikely to generalize beyond a limited range of cases with highly similar contexts. By contrast, we investigate the flexible categorization processes that stakeholders use to construct an organization's identity in terms of its membership in a set of (more or less central, distinctive, or enduring) social and conceptual categories. These categorization processes are likely to be much less variable and more generalizable across contexts. In particular, we examine how stakeholders use language in their identity claims to classify organizations.

Language and Categorization

To explore how language is used in identity claims to construct organizational identity, we now consider the relationship between language and categorization, a major topic of research in cognitive linguistics (Taylor, 2002). Most relevant to our purpose are the empirical findings and theoretical developments of prototype theory (Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1978; Taylor, 1995), which developed over the past 30 years but has earlier roots in Wittgenstein's (1958) philosophy of language. Classical views of categorization assumed that all objects in a category shared essential features and that the criterion for classifying a particular object in a category was the presence of these features. Thus a category was assumed to be homogeneous in content and separated from other categories by distinct boundaries (Lakoff, 1987). But Wittgenstein showed that the referents of words such as *game* do not necessarily share a set of common attributes. Instead, he argued that such referents bear a "family resemblance" to one another, forming amorphous categories with fuzzy boundaries. Words label ambiguous categories of different meanings, and to understand a speaker's intended meaning on a given occasion, the audience must understand how the word is used in relation to its particular linguistic and social context.

Empirical research on human categorization further shows that phenomenal categories are internally structured, whereby some members are seen as more prototypical of a category than are others (Rosch, 1978; Rosch & Lloyd, 1978). For example, most North Americans perceive robins as being more typical than penguins of the category *bird*. Thus category membership

is based on the perceived similarity (or other kinds of associations) between a particular object and category prototypes. Instead of having homogeneous contents, categories can have a variety of internal structures by which object membership is determined, including membership gradients, such as for the category *tall*, and radial structures, such as for the category *mother* (Lakoff, 1987; Taylor, 1995).

When a communicator uses words to label an object, the audience's knowledge of the category influences how the object is likely to be interpreted; that is, category labels tend to invoke mental images for audiences based on their understanding of category prototypes (Duimering, 1997). For example, when a speaker uses the word *bird* to refer to a penguin, audiences are more likely to picture a robin than a penguin. Furthermore, audiences tend to associate default interpretations and images with conventional uses of words in particular social and temporal contexts because word meanings are established through collective processes of social interaction that emphasize certain distinctions over others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tsoukas & Vladimirov, 2001). Speakers must therefore use additional words to differentiate their intended meaning from these default interpretations. To continue the example, if the word *penguin* itself were not available, a speaker might add modifiers to the word *bird*, such as *lives in the Antarctic*, *flightless*, or *looks like it wears a tuxedo*, to invoke the desired image. Such modifiers differentiate the speaker's intended image from prototypical images associated with the category *bird*. This process involves using multiple linguistic categorizations, as in the earlier scientist-biologist example. Whereas a speaker who uses a single label to identify an object invokes an image based on the audience's conventional knowledge of the category prototype, a speaker who uses multiple categorizations constructs a unique image by differentiating the object from category prototypes.

Language, Categorization Processes, and Organizational Identity

Building on our earlier discussion of the analytical equivalence of social and conceptual categories, we argue that multiple linguistic categorizations are also used in organizational identity claims to construct unique organizational identities. Any label used to identify an organization defines its identity by invoking prototypical images that are conventionally associated with a particular category. Speakers can construct a unique organizational identity by using multiple words that collectively identify the organization with a unique combination of several conventional categories.

Organizational identity, then, is related to the way people classify an organization into social or conceptual categories. Some of these categories may refer to what people perceive as an organization's attributes; other categories refer to the social or organizational groups (e.g., industry sectors) in which the organization is perceived to be a member. Language plays a fundamental role in this categorization process because when we attach a linguistic label to an organization, we place it in a category. Precisely because words are categorical and ambiguous, we tend to associate them with conventional meanings that invoke prototypical images. To differentiate one organization's identity from those of others, therefore, we must use multiple words to classify the organization within a combination of various linguistic categories. Whereas a single categorization would define the organization as being basically identical to the prototype, subsequent categorizations would construct its identity more uniquely and unambiguously by differentiating it from category prototypes along various comparative dimensions. Thus, a language-based identity claim constructs organizational identity by establishing a unique system of linguistic categories and dynamically positioning the organization within this system.

Method: Imaging the Organization Through Mission Statements

To investigate this theoretical view further, we studied the use of language in corporate mission statements to construct organizational identity. We chose mission statements because of their relative availability and because they represent prototypical examples of organizational identity claims, constructed explicitly to project a positive organizational image. Although mission statements may define an organization's official identity, we take no position on their validity or the degree to which various stakeholders may agree with such definitions. Nor do we suggest that official perspectives reflected in mission statements have any priority over other stakeholder perspectives. Such questions of validity, consensus, or priority are irrelevant to the question of how language is used in mission statements to construct organizational identity by invoking particular conceptual categories.

Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Mission Statements

Our treatment of mission statements is different from that of prior research. Most studies have used content-analysis methods to identify the

topical themes, stakeholders, or other semantic contents that mission statements refer to (Bart, 1998; McTavish, 1995; Morris, 1996; Noy, 1998; Pekar & Abraham, 1995; Total Research Corporation, 1999) or to examine potential correlations between particular contents and organizational performance (Ackoff, 1987; Calfree, 1993; Collins & Porras, 1991; Germain & Cooper, 1990; Ledford, Wendenhof, & Strahley, 1995; O’Gorman & Doran, 1999; Rarick & Vitton, 1995). Our approach also differs from traditional discourse-analysis techniques (Brown & Yule, 1983; Gee, 1999), such as those used by Swales and Rogers (1995) in their mission statement study. They interpreted the themes in two firms’ new mission statements in relation to the firms’ specific social and historical contexts and discussed how rhetorical techniques used in the statements (e.g., first-person pronouns) might effect “employee buy-in” (p. 223). Finally, our approach is different from critical discourse analyses that consider broader social aspects of identity, such as the way texts might reflect social power structures by privileging certain points of view or subject positions (Fairclough, 1989). Indeed mission statements are the product of social power relations and do tend to privilege official organizational perspectives over those of other stakeholders. But our analysis focuses on the cognitive linguistic processes used to construct identity in relation to a system of value-laden categories, regardless of the particular social origins of such categories.

To illustrate how our cognitive linguistic approach differs from content-analysis and traditional discourse-analysis techniques, we use the following excerpt from Honeywell’s mission statement cited in Swales and Rogers’s (1995) study: “To ensure continuous improvements in our productivity and quality. By seeking mutually beneficial partnerships with suppliers” (p. 236). A content analysis might emphasize that the themes *improvements*, *productivity*, and *quality* are referenced in the text or that *suppliers* are mentioned as organizational stakeholders. In their discourse analysis of this text, Swales and Rogers interpreted the themes in relation to the firm’s historical context, suggesting they “both signal and promote the ‘real-world’ changes that were required to make Honeywell profitable again” (p. 236). Swales and Rogers also suggested that the “one-two staccato rhythm” of the text “accentuates causes and effects” (p. 236).

The current study examines how language invokes cognitive categorization processes to construct an image of the organization’s identity. Assuming that language use in communication is integrally related to human cognitive processing, we focus on the structural characteristics of categorization through texts. Our analysis emphasizes the following questions: What conceptual categories are referenced by the identity claim? What are the properties of these

categories (e.g., category boundaries, internal structure, positive or negative value)? How do these categories interact to form a classification system or scheme? And how is the conceptual object that is the communication subject (i.e., the organization about which the claim is made) positioned in relation to this classification scheme? In the preceding excerpt, Honeywell is defined by the positively valued thematic categories *productivity* and *quality*, and the internal contents of each are implicitly structured by a continuum of potential values: Low productivity and quality are bad; high productivity and quality are good. The phrase *continuous improvements* implicitly suggests a dynamically changing identity whereby Honeywell's relative position along these two category continua is moving in a positive direction, toward higher productivity and higher quality. The excerpt also identifies the organization as "seeking . . . partnerships with suppliers"—that is, attempting to gain membership in the positively valued (i.e., "mutually beneficial") behavioral category *partnerships*. Furthermore, a logical relationship is established between categories, whereby membership in the partnerships category will "ensure" the "continuous improvement" dynamic suggested in the statement.

Our approach therefore considers how a mission statement constructs organizational identity by establishing an idiosyncratic classification scheme of value-laden and logically related social and conceptual categories and by positioning the organization within this scheme. Our methodology and resulting framework emphasize the generic cognitive linguistic processes used to image organizations through text rather than the semantic contents or themes associated with a particular text. Of course, as the example suggests, we must consider the semantic content of text to understand the categorization processes involved, but our research objective is to identify the generic cognitive linguistic processes of categorization rather than particular textual meanings. Thus our methodology could be viewed as a form of content and discourse analysis, but we pay attention to the cognitive processes operating through discourse rather than to the semantic contents or themes referenced by discourse.

Data and Coding

Our data set consisted of 100 mission statements that we chose randomly from *The Mission Statement Book* (Abrahams, 1995), a compilation of mission statements taken from annual reports of more than 300 publicly traded firms. These 100 mission statements ranged in length from one sentence to more than three pages of typewritten text (totaling 840 sentences). They represented the following industry sectors: advertising, computer services, construction, environmental engineering, food and beverages, high

technology, manufacturing, medical products and services, motor vehicles, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, and utilities.

We used an inductive method involving an iterative process of coding, revising, and recoding similar to Glaser and Strauss's (1968) grounded theory approach to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework and coding scheme. First we closely examined 10 single-sentence mission statements to obtain a basic understanding of how language functions to classify organizations in identity claims. Then we iteratively analyzed another 25 mission statements consisting of 214 sentences. By the end of these two coding stages, we were able to delineate a comparatively thorough framework and coding scheme. This framework consists of 11 different cognitive linguistic processes for establishing a system of conceptual categories and positioning an organization in relation to these categories. We added two additional processes (category selection and category continua, which we discuss in detail later) to the framework for logical completeness but did not code them explicitly in the analysis. As a third stage of coding, the first author (Ran) coded another 65 mission statements (616 sentences) individually by using iterative passes through the data set. Finally, we conducted an interrater-reliability check in which the second author (Duimering) independently coded 30 sentences chosen randomly from the latter data set of 616 sentences. After calculating the coefficient of reliability (CR; Holsti, 1969) and the π statistic control for chance-coding agreement (Scott, 1955), we found that both values are high (CR = .71, π = .62), given the large number of coding categories (i.e., 11) within the framework.

We describe our coding procedure in general terms because a full description would require an understanding of the complete framework resulting from the analysis. Further details will become clear when we present our results. In our analysis, we treated natural English sentences as the unit of analysis. We decomposed sentences into meaningful clauses, with each clause having a central thematic category (usually a noun or pronoun) and surrounding parts of speech (typically adjectives or adverbs) that modify the category in various ways. A sentence provides a linguistic context for its clauses and the categories contained in clauses and therefore can be analyzed as a self-contained unit consisting of a set of interrelated categories (Grace, 1987; Taylor, 1995, 2002; Ungerer & Schmid, 1996). As in the Honeywell example, we explored how categories were established and interconnected to form a classification scheme. Because the meaning of a particular word or phrase used in an identity claim to establish a category might be ambiguous,

surrounding parts of speech serve to modify and thus clarify its meaning by bracketing the boundaries of the category and configuring its internal structure. When we determined the structural properties of categories and their relations, we focused on additional linguistic processes used to define the organization's identity in relation to this classification scheme. In the following sections, we present in detail our findings about how language was used in these mission statements to define the organization's location within the classification scheme, convey dynamic images of the organization's movement through the classification scheme, and establish logical or functional relationships between identity categories.

Framework: Imaging the Organization Through Cognitive Linguistic Processes

The framework that we developed from our analysis conceptualizes organizational identity construction as two classes of cognitive linguistic processes, which we refer to collectively as *imaging*: (a) establishing a classification scheme and (b) defining organizational identity in relation to this scheme. Table 1 illustrates an overview of the complete framework. The temporal modality columns in Table 1 reflect the idea that identity claims may be framed in past, present, or future tense to image past, present, or future organizational identities. Appendix A lists the coding frequencies for each of the cognitive linguistic processes identified.

Establishing a Classification Scheme

The cognitive linguistic processes that the identity claim authors used to establish a classification scheme through their mission statements include selecting a particular set of categories for imaging the organization and structuring the boundaries and internal contents of these categories.

Category Selection

Although our focus is on the cognitive categorization processes used in mission statements rather than on the semantic meanings of particular words, we cannot identify such processes without considering the semantic properties of the categories selected through the imaging process. We identified 2,369 unique categories, and those appearing at least 15 times in the data set are listed in Appendix B. These categories are generally consistent

Table 1
Organizational Imaging Framework

	Imaging Processes	Temporal Modality		
		Past	Present	Future
Establishing a classification scheme	Category selection Category boundaries and internal structure	Comprehensive words and lists Specifying modifiers Category Continua		
Defining organizational identity in relation to the classification scheme	Positioning	Positive Negative Neutral		
	Movement	Positive Negative Stable		
	Category interactions	Receiving inputs Providing outputs Interaction processes		

with those found in content-analysis studies that identified major themes in mission statements (Bart, 1998; McTavish, 1995; Morris, 1996; Noy, 1998; Pekar & Abraham, 1995; Total Research Corporation, 1999), which suggests that our data set represents a typical sample of corporate mission statements.

Unsurprisingly, the results suggest that mission statements tend to define organizations using categories with positive value connotations, such as value, quality, growth, success. But *positive* and *negative* are context-dependent concepts that are relative rather than absolute. For example, consider the different connotations of the word *follower* in these mission statement (MS) excerpts:

- Corning is a leader, not a *follower*. (Corning Inc. MS)
- BCS seeks to be an early *follower* with respect to services offered. (Business Computing Services, 2002)
- We value the opportunity for each member of the WSU Libraries to be both a leader and a *follower*. (Washington State University Libraries, 2002)¹

In the Corning excerpt, *follower* has a negative connotation compared to *leader*, but in the BCS excerpt, the phrase *seeks to be* signals positive connotations for *follower*. In the WSU Libraries excerpt, the word *both*

establishes a sense of equality between a *leader* and *follower*, implying that both have positive connotations.

How particular categories of identity claims are selected and whether they have positive or negative connotations depend on factors beyond the scope of the current study (e.g., author intentions, audience perceptions, social contexts). In our analysis, we focus on the implied value structure associated with the positive and negative categories used in mission statements and on how the organization is defined positively or negatively in terms of these value-laden categories.

Category Boundaries and Internal Structure

When a word or phrase has established an identity category, its meaning may still be ambiguous. Authors reduce this ambiguity by using modifying language to broaden or narrow the boundaries of a selected category and to configure its internal structure.

Comprehensive words and lists. Mission statements often emphasize the comprehensiveness of an organization's activities, products, or services. Because an organization must satisfy the demands and expectations of stakeholders in diverse domains, it needs to be perceived as capable of providing complete and comprehensive coverage of these domains. Organizations project such an image by defining the contents of identity categories broadly through the use of what we call comprehensive all-embracing (denoted as CA) words (nouns, adjectives, adverbials), such as *every*, *global*, *world*, *all*, *full*, and so on. For instance, describing an organization as a global corporation broadly defines the boundaries of its activities to include the entire globe. Mission statements also sometimes enumerate a comprehensive list (denoted as CL) of category examples as a less direct means of defining category contents broadly. For example, the following statement enumerates a list of seven stakeholders and also uses the word *all* to define the category of "groups associated with the business" comprehensively: "To serve fairly and in proper balance the interests of *all* (CA) groups associated with the business—*customers, stockholders, employees, suppliers, community neighbors, government and the general public* (CL)" (Armstrong MS). In our data set, we coded 746 instances of comprehensive words or lists (an average of 0.89 per sentence), representing 12.98% of the total coding.

Specifying modifiers. If an organization's identity is defined too comprehensively, audiences may interpret the claim as an exaggeration or as simply too general, vague, or imprecise. Thus we found that the use of

comprehensive words or lists was often balanced by an opposing process involving the use of specifying modifiers (denoted SP). Various grammatical forms (e.g., preposition phrases, *-ing* structures, relative clauses) were used to modify the meaning of identity categories by specifying category boundaries. SPs perform three kinds of functions: restricting the boundaries of an identity category, establishing hierarchical relationships between categories and sub-categories to form a statement-specific taxonomy of identity categories, and positioning the organization within the resulting classification scheme. For example, in the following excerpt the comprehensive list *products and services* is subsequently restricted by the phrase *in the brewing industry* to specify the particular subcategory of products and services relevant to Anheuser-Busch: “maintain our reputation for the highest quality *products and services* (CL) *in the brewing industry* (SP)” (Anheuser-Busch MS).

Comprehensive words or lists imply the expansion of the boundaries and contents of an identity category whereas specifying modifiers imply the restriction or contraction of a category. These two opposing dynamics often functioned together within mission statements, potentially balancing competing author objectives to exaggerate positive or negative information on one hand and present precise, detailed, or plausible information on the other. Thus, specifying may reduce category ambiguity and increase the believability of an identity claim. In our data set, we coded 298 instances of specifying (an average of 0.35 per sentence), representing 5.19% of the total coding. Apparently mission statements are more likely to include comprehensive than specific categories, suggesting a general tendency toward identity exaggeration.

Category continua. Our analysis suggests that in addition to demarcating the boundaries of identity categories, language is also used in mission statements to structure their internal contents. We found that identity categories were frequently structured in terms of a gradient, or continuum, of meanings, reflecting varying values along dimensions corresponding with particular identity attributes. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that people perceive categories as internally graded based on the relative typicality of category members (Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1978). For example, in the following excerpt, the words *from* and *to* construct a conceptual category referring to a variety of potential ways of interacting with customers: “Atlanta Gas Light Company must change . . . *from* . . . offering what we think customers want . . . *to* providing what customers value” (Atlanta Gas Light Co. MS).

The semantic content of this category is structured as a continuum from “offering what we think customers want,” a self-oriented view of the firm’s

behavior, to “providing what customers value,” a customer-oriented view. In addition to implying a range of semantic meanings associated with different positions along this continuum, the statement also implies a corresponding value structure—“offering what we think customers want” is bad whereas “providing what customers value” is good—and further suggests that Atlanta Gas must relocate itself from the bad to the good end of this continuum. (Arguably this statement could be analyzed as defining two distinct subcategories of customer interaction behavior to claim that Atlanta Gas must move out of one subcategory and into the other rather than a single category structured as a continuum of meanings. But the cognitive processes involved in forming the images invoked by the statement are essentially equivalent in both interpretations.)

The Atlanta Gas example demonstrates three points. First, the authors of identity claims are not restricted to the use of conventional conceptual categories drawn from everyday social discourse. Rather, authors can use language creatively to construct new identity categories that serve their particular interests in stating the claim. Second, the category continuum establishes a dimension whereby different positions along the continuum correspond with different semantic content and differently valued organizational identities. A mission statement that classifies an organization into several different conceptual categories establishes a kind of multidimensional cognitive space consisting of multiple continua; thus, the statement constructs organizational identity by locating the organization within this space. Third, because different locations in a multidimensional cognitive space are associated with differently valued identities, language can convey the image of an organization dynamically moving through the space, away from a negative identity position toward a more positive one.

Defining Organizational Identity in Relation to the Classification Scheme

The preceding cognitive linguistic processes establish a system of identity categories, bracket their boundaries, and define their internal structures. Our analysis indicated, however, that additional processes further define organizational identity in relation to the cognitive space associated with this classification scheme. Language is used to define the organization’s position within the cognitive space, to convey dynamic images of organizational movement through the space, and to establish logical or functional interactions between specific identity categories.

Positioning

An organizational identity claim defines an organization's identity by positioning it within the system of categories established by the identity claim and at figurative locations along category continua. Because a category continuum implies a value structure, the organization may be positioned at either the positive or negative end of the continuum or at some neutral midpoint between these two locations, depending on the identity claim author's intentions.

Positive positioning. Because mission statements are identity claims that are designed to convey positive organizational images, language positioning the organization either in positively defined categories or at positive ends of category continua occurred frequently in the data. We found that two cognitive linguistic processes were commonly used to locate the organization in a positive position: using positive nouns or noun phrases (denoted +N) and using positive superlatives (denoted +). By *positive nouns*, we are referring to nouns that bear generally positive connotations within the organization's broader managerial and social context. In the following example, the positive nouns *quality* and *commitment* establish positively valued categories, and the word *distinguish* implicitly positions the organization, Comptek, within both categories: "to provide innovative (+) . . . products and services which distinguish Comptek on the basis of quality (+N) and commitment (+N)" (Comptek Research Inc. MS).

In the English language, grammatical superlatives are often signaled by the suffixes *-er* and *-est*, structuring categories as continua comprising three relative degrees or positions (denoted +, ++, +++, for good, better, and best, respectively). Positive and negative superlatives often function together as paired opposites, forming a symmetrical continuum centered on a neutral position (e.g., worst, worse, bad, neutral, good, better, best). We defined superlatives broadly in our analysis to include such grammatical superlatives and other words—mainly modifiers such as adjectives and adverbs—with positive or negative connotations that similarly function to construct category continua and to position an organization at various points along these continua. In the preceding example, the modifier *innovative* implicitly sets up a continuum of less to more innovative "products and services" and simultaneously positions Comptek at the positive (i.e., more innovative) end of this continuum. Positive nouns and superlatives are closely related in practice, so we coded both types as positive positioning rather than distinguishing between them. For example, besides establishing a category in its own right in this excerpt, *quality* also implicitly functions as a superlative, structuring

the category “products and services” as a continuum from low to high quality and positioning Comptek at the higher quality end of this continuum. Of all the cognitive linguistic processes we identified in our framework, positive positioning occurred most frequently: We coded 2,355 instances (an average of 2.8 per sentence), representing 40.98% of the total coding.

Negative positioning. Language in identity claims that positions the organization in negatively defined categories or at negative ends of category continua constructs a negative organizational identity. We found that such negative positioning was accomplished through processes analogous to those used in positive positioning: using negative nouns or noun phrases (denoted –N) and using negative superlatives (denoted –). Because organizations usually have little interest in defining their identity in negative terms, negative positioning occurred far less frequently than positive positioning in our mission statement data: We coded 154 occurrences (an average of 0.18 per sentence), representing 2.68% of the total coding. But our analysis revealed several important cases in which language was used to define an organization positively by positioning the organization at the negative end of a conceptual category continuum. For example, the organization may benefit from being positioned negatively in a category that has negative connotations within the broader organizational discourse. In the following excerpt, *minimal* signals a negative position within the negative category *impact on the environment*. Thus, in such instances, the combined use of two negatives—a negative position within a negative category—conveys a positive organizational identity. In this example, we use nested brackets (i.e., {positive noun phrase [negative noun phrase]}) to denote the hierarchical structure of positive and negative identity categories invoked by the use of language in the statement: “Developing products and processes that have a {*minimal* (–) [impact on the environment] (–N)} (+N) (3M MS).”

We found other uses of negative positioning in mission statements. For example, in addition to defining an organization’s present identity, mission statements often constructed an organization’s past identity retrospectively. In some cases, they constructed a negative past organizational identity to contrast it with a more positively defined present identity, conveying the impression of organizational improvement over time. Similarly, the excerpt from the Atlanta Gas Light Company mission statement shown earlier was one of several instances that we found in our data in which an organization’s present identity was constructed in negative terms in contrast to a future identity that was defined more positively, apparently as a rhetorical attempt to justify the need for organizational change.

Neutral positioning. Finally, identity claims may contain neutral language that positions the organization in a neutrally defined category or at a midpoint between positive and negative extremes of a category continuum. Neutral positioning (denoted N) conveys no clear positive or negative connotations and therefore positions the organization in a relatively emotion-free, preference-free context. We coded only 14 instances of neutral positioning (an average of 0.02 per sentence), representing 0.24% of the total coding. In the following excerpt, Chrysler is defined in relation to the neutral category *behaviors of all our people*: “Our reputation is important. It will be determined by the standards and [behaviors of all our people] (N)” (Chrysler MS).

One likely reason for the infrequent use of neutral positioning in identity claims is that organizational identity construction is inherently a value-laden process, and no identity claim is entirely value free. An identity claim that defines an organization too positively or too negatively, however, may lack credibility to target audiences. Thus an identity claim that defines an organization neutrally may construct an identity that audiences consider more trustworthy. But some may argue that the very mention of any conceptual category in an identity claim implies the author’s rhetorical intent to define the organization either positively or negatively. On one hand, the Chrysler excerpt could be interpreted as defining the organization positively because employees could be expected to exhibit positive behavior. On the other hand, the statement could also be interpreted as a straightforward factual claim about the influence of employee behaviors (positive or negative) on the organization’s reputation (again positive or negative). As such, we coded it as an instance of neutral positioning based on our conservative interpretation of authorial intent.

Movement

As we suggested, the images constructed through organizational identity claims are not necessarily restricted to static representations of the organization. Besides existential statements of being (e.g., we are, it is), mission statements often represent statements of becoming (e.g., we will be), using verbs and other grammatical forms to convey images of organizations in a dynamic state of flux. Mission statements reflect such dynamics through what we call movement processes—language that projects an image of the organization moving along figurative trajectories through the cognitive space established by the identity claim toward positions representing future identity states or goals. Movement processes imply that the organization is in the process of repositioning itself from one identity category to another

or within an identity category from one end of a continuum to another. We identified three types of movements: positive, negative, and stable.

Positive movement. Mission statements often constructed organizations as moving from a negative to a positive identity category or within a category toward the more positive end of a continuum. Such positive movements were often expressed metaphorically as upward or forward movement of the organization. For instance, in the following excerpt, the verbs *grow* and *flourish* suggest movement toward a more positive identity position (denoted ^): “profits are required for the company to *grow* (^) and *flourish* (^)” (Coachmen Industries MS).

Positive movements suggest that although the organization may not have yet reached a desired identity position or goal, it is moving along a trajectory toward it. We also found instances in which present identities were constructed in terms of positive movements away from more negatively defined past positions within the cognitive space established through the identity claim. We coded 1,119 positive movements in our data set (an average of 1.33 per sentence), representing 19.47% of the total coding.

Negative movement. Identity claims can also imply movement of the organization from a positive to a negative identity category or toward the more negative end of a category continuum, often expressed metaphorically as downward or backward movement. As with negative positioning, we found a relatively low frequency of negative movement (denoted v) in our mission-statement data: We coded 29 negative movements (an average of 0.03 per sentence), representing 0.5% of the total coding. But we did find that verbs such as *reduce*, *eliminate*, *lower*, and so on were used to convey negative movement within a negative identity category, invoking an image of positive movement. In the following example, the verbs *eliminate* and *minimize* suggest negative movements of the organization’s identity within the respective negative categories of *waste* and *costs*: “processes that [*eliminate* (v) waste (-)](^), [*minimize* (v) costs (-)](^) and enhance production efficiency” (Weirton Steel Corporation MS). We also found a few cases in which negative movement within a positive category (e.g., *reduced profits*) was used apparently to justify the need for organizational change.

Stable movement. Finally, some language in the mission statements suggested images of the organization moving in a stable fashion. We coded 234 of these occurrences (an average of 0.28 per sentence), representing 4.07% of the total coding. Stable movement does not necessarily imply that an

organization's constructed identity position has not changed. Instead stable movement is somewhat analogous to the ideas of constant velocity or acceleration in physics, whereby an organization's identity is represented as being in a kind of dynamic equilibrium (e.g., constant positive movement) rather than a static position. In the data, stable movements were typically used to convey images of consistent performance within some positively defined category of activity or behavior. In the following example, the words *consistent* and *maintaining* are used in conjunction with positively defined behavioral categories (denoted within brackets []) to construct an identity characterized by a stable (denoted =) pattern of positive behaviors: "Ball Corporation's mission . . . is to provide consistent (=) [customer value] . . . while maintaining (=) [high standards of integrity, ethical conduct and social responsibility]" (Ball Corporation MS).

Category Interactions

In identity claims, language is used to construct an organization's identity in terms of its interactions with other categories of social actors or conceptual objects; that is, identity claims such as mission statements do not construct the organization's identity in isolation but in relation to a set of other categories of subjects and objects that interact with the organization. Identity claims also construct the identities of these other subjects and objects, as well as the nature of their interactions with the organization, from the idiosyncratic perspective of the identity claim author.

Although social actors and conceptual objects might interact with one another in numerous ways, our analysis suggested that three general types of interactions were particularly relevant to organizations as social actors. We found that mission statements conveyed images of organizations (a) receiving categories of inputs from other actors, (b) providing categories of outputs to others, and (c) specifying various processes of functional relationships between categories of subjects, objects, or actions. In general, we found that mission statements tended to construct an organization's identity as a kind of dynamic system in flux, in which certain categories of organizational inputs were logically related to other categories of outputs.

Receiving inputs. We found 248 instances of inputs in our data set (an average of 0.30 per sentence), representing 4.32% of the total coding. In the following example, Baldor Electric is constructed in relation to its employees, who are treated as a category of organizational inputs received (denoted <) and whose identities are constructed idealistically in relation to organizational

goals and objectives: “*attract (<) and retain competent employees dedicated to reaching our goals and objectives*” (Baldor Electric MS).

Providing outputs. The mission statements mentioned organizational outputs relatively more frequently than inputs, most likely because mission statements are constructed primarily to influence external stakeholders who receive various organizational outputs. We found 412 instances of outputs (an average of 0.49 per sentence) in our data set, representing 7.17% of the total coding. In the following excerpt, the idealized category *best possible values* is treated as an output (denoted >) “offer[ed]” by the organization to its customers: “We will always offer (>) our customers the best possible values” (Bruno’s Inc. MS).

Interaction processes. In identity claims, interaction processes (denoted @) specify idealized functional relationships between various subject, object, or action categories. We found 138 occurrences of interaction processes (an average of 0.16 per sentence) in our data set, representing 2.4% of the total coding. These processes construct causal, transitive, and associative relationships, as well as various other logical forms. In the following excerpt, the words *by* and *through* are used to construct a systematic chain of logic whereby “focusing on . . . processes” and “the involvement of all employees” logically result in “improvements of products and services”: “Improvements of products and services will be accomplished by (@) focusing on the processes that make up our business and through (@) the involvement of all employees to help with the improvement of these processes” (Anthony Industries MS).

The preceding examples illustrate how the language of mission statements is used to distinguish the organization from other categories of actors or objects whose identities are also imaged through the language of the identity claim. A mission statement, therefore, constructs a system of actors and objects whose identities and interactions with the organization are defined ideally from the organization’s own idiosyncratic, self-interested point of view.

An Integrated Example

Finally, the following example illustrates how several of the cognitive linguistic processes we have identified integrate to convey an image of organizational identity: “Our mission (^) is to provide (>) innovative (+) [electronic and telecommunications] (SP & CL) [products and services] (CL) which (@) distinguish (^) Comptek on the basis of quality (+N) and commitment (+N)” (Comptek Research Inc. MS). In this example, the identity of Comptek

Research Inc. is constructed in terms of the organizational outputs it “provides” through the comprehensive category *products and services*, which is further specified by the modifiers *electronic and telecommunications*. Other parts of the statement position the organization in relation to this output category, which can be understood as a continuum of more or less “innovative” products and services, with Comptek positioned at the positive, more innovative, end of the continuum. The statement also constructs a logical interaction process whereby “innovative products and services” serve to “distinguish Comptek” by positioning it in the positively valued categories *quality and commitment*. *Quality* also implicitly structures the *products and services* category as a continuum, positioning Comptek at the positive (higher quality) end of this continuum.

Conclusions and Future Research

This article investigated the cognitive linguistic processes involved in constructing organizational identity through language-based identity claims. Researchers have linked internal and external constituents’ perceptions of organizational identity to member commitment, organizational performance, and various other outcomes. Although rhetorical attempts to influence these perceptions are widespread, the cognitive linguistic processes underlying these attempts are poorly understood. We used a grounded theory study of mission statements to develop a framework describing how language is used in identity claims to identify an organization through a system of cognitive linguistic categories, a process we refer to as *imaging*. We use this term to emphasize certain dynamic aspects of the process and to distinguish it from other concepts in the literature. The verb *imaging* emphasizes that identity claims amount to symbolic acts (Burke, 1989) on the part of their authors—acts that go beyond simply classifying an organization into conventional social or industry categories.

Our findings suggested that imaging involves two general classes of symbolic acts. In the first, language is used to establish a classification scheme of identity categories and to define the boundaries and internal structures of these categories. The cognitive linguistic processes of selecting categories and of using comprehensive words and lists, specifying modifiers, and category continua collectively establish a classification scheme and cognitive space within which different locations correspond to identities that have different meanings and perceived values. Because mission statements explicitly attempt to construct a positive organizational image,

the classification schemes they invoke are likely to represent highly idiosyncratic and self-interested worldviews. They are likely to include only categories that make the organization look good and to define boundaries and internal structures of identity categories in ways that suit the interests of the organization. In the second class of symbolic acts, language is used to define the organizational identity in relation to the classification scheme. Imaging processes position the organization in positively, negatively, or neutrally valued locations within the cognitive space established through the identity claim; convey images of organizational movement from one location to another within the space; and construct identity through input and output interactions between the organization and other ideally defined categories of subjects and objects and through functional process interactions between categories. Although for ease of presentation we treated these two classes of symbolic acts as analytically distinct, they function simultaneously in communication; that is, words or phrases used in an identity claim simultaneously establish a classification scheme and define the organization in relation to that scheme.

The verb *imaging* also highlights a more subtle form of symbolic action in regard to constructing organizational identity: the dynamic nature of the organizational image itself. The literature linking identity to categorization has focused almost exclusively on simple category membership as the basis for identification (e.g., the identification of an organization as a member of an industry category). But people perceive phenomenal categories not as homogeneous in content but rather as internally structured so that the objects within them are more or less prototypical of the category (Lakoff, 1987; Rosch, 1978); therefore an organization defined as a member of a particular category tends to be perceived by others according to their knowledge of category prototypes. To distinguish the organization from others in the same category, an identity claim constructs an organization's identity through multiple linguistic categorizations that differentiate it from category prototypes along relevant dimensions.

The results indicate that organizational identity construction entails dynamics that go well beyond merely classifying the organization into static industry categories. Besides just using straightforward existential categories to define what an organization is, identity claims draw on the analytical equivalence of attributes as well as conceptual and social categories to construct organizational identity in more complex ways. Identity claims also use action categories to construct an organization's identity with respect to what it does—its activities and its interactions with categories of other social actors or objects. We found that mission statements defined an organization through

language that conveys the organization's movement between and within categories and its interactions with other categories of subjects, objects, or actions, such as receiving inputs (e.g., employees, raw materials), providing outputs (e.g., products, services, returns on investments), and specifying the logic of such interaction processes (e.g., we hire, use, develop, produce, provide). Identity claims function in relation to temporal modalities by constructing an organization's identity not only according to what the organization is claiming to be at present but also according to what it is claiming to have been in the past or to become in the future, signaling a dynamic process of transformation from one identity to another through time. In a sense, the images evoked by organizational identity claims are more like motion pictures of the organization than still photographs.

Finally, our use of the term *imaging* emphasizes the generic cognitive linguistic processes involved in constructing organizational identity through communication rather than the properties of particular identities. In the organizational studies literature, the concept of *identity* has referred to a set of presumably inherent attributes that are seen as an organization's central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Our research approach makes no assumptions about the centrality or distinctiveness of the attribute categories evoked by identity claims or about the duration in which such classifications might be accepted as valid by particular stakeholders.

Because organizations are social constructions, the attributes deemed to constitute their identities reflect the outcome of a negotiated social process of claims and counterclaims made by diverse organizational stakeholders, potentially resulting in a degree of consensus around a particular version of an organization's identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). As an explicit attempt to define an organization's official identity, a mission statement is only one claim among others that may or may not articulate or influence stakeholders' perceptions of the organization. Imaging and the social construction of organizational identity, therefore, reflect interdependent but different processes that function on different timescales and reflect different theoretical units of analysis. A single identity claim does not socially construct an organization's identity any more than a single encounter between social actors constructs a social institution. But by describing the cognitive linguistic processes involved in identity claims, this article can contribute to future investigations of the communication processes involved in the social construction of identity among stakeholders with competing interests and perspectives.

For instance, although mission statements represent organizations' self-categorizations, the analytical approach described here can also be used to investigate organizational identity claims made from other perspectives. In

the following example, we have applied our approach to a *BBC News* report about the accounting firm Arthur Andersen's involvement in illegal accounting practices in relation to the corporate collapse of Enron in 2002:

Arthur Andersen once was (past) one of the world's (CA) largest (+++) accountancy (SP) firms (N). But now (present) a jury in a US court (SP) has found the firm guilty (-) of obstructing (v) justice (+N) by (@) shredding (v) documents (N) relating to (@) the collapse (-) of ... Enron. ("Q & A," 2002)

These statements construct the identity of Arthur Andersen as transforming over time from a positive to a negative identity. Andersen's past identity (denoted *past*) is constructed positively using comprehensiveness and positive positioning whereas its present identity (denoted *present*) is constructed negatively through negative positioning and negative movements. This example illustrates how our method could be used to explore the language used to socially construct organizational identity in situations in which various stakeholders with competing points of view disagree on how to categorize an organization. Using the methods described here, cross-sectional studies could investigate the different categorization strategies of competing stakeholders, and longitudinal studies could examine how the identity claims of diverse constituents interact and change as a particular version of an organization's identity becomes institutionalized over time.

Our theoretical approach and methods could also be applied to investigating imaging phenomena in other domains. For example, the methods may be applied to social psychology analyses of individual identity and self-categorization processes. Although individual identity has traditionally been viewed narrowly with respect to social-category membership or the possession of unique personal attributes, the current study explores a wider variety of imaging processes and contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of how language is used to construct identity in relation to a system of conceptual categories. Drawing on social psychology and cognitive linguistic research linking identity, language, and cognitive processes of categorization to conceptualize organizational identity construction in terms of multiple linguistic categorizations, we argued that the distinction between social categories and personal attributes is false and that any type of conceptual or linguistic category—whether or not it nominally refers to a conventional social group—can be used to construct identity. By investigating the flexible categorization processes involved in identity construction rather than the contents of particular identities, our theoretical approach and methods could offer new directions for social psychology research on identity.

Finally, our findings have practical implications for managers who use rhetoric to construct images of desired strategic actions in order to motivate employees or persuade stakeholders of the need for organizational change (Eccles et al., 1992; Peters, 1978; Pfeffer, 1981) and for marketers who construct product identity claims in the form of advertisements and attempt to position products in ways that fit institutionalized market segments. Although certain kinds of managerial pronouncements and advertising claims are more persuasive, trustworthy, or believable than others, little is known about the structural properties of such claims that make them more rhetorically effective. The methods we described here could be adapted to investigate such phenomena in field or experimental research in specific areas of application. We might be able to improve our understanding of why some statements are more believable or persuasive than others by varying factors such as the degree of positive, negative, or neutral positioning associated with a claim or the degree to which claims are defined comprehensively or specifically. Our research provides a general framework and set of concepts for investigating imaging processes in a diverse variety of practical applications.

Appendix A

Coding Frequencies for Each Imaging Process

Imaging Process ^a	Denotation Code(s)	Number of Codes	Average Number of Codes per Sentence (840 sentences)	Percentage of Total Codes
Positive positioning	+N, +, ++, +++	2,355	2.80	40.98
Positive movement	^	1,119	1.33	19.47
Comprehensive words and lists	CA, CL	746	0.89	12.98
Outputs	>	412	0.49	7.17
Specifying modifiers	SP	298	0.35	5.19
Inputs	<	248	0.30	4.32
Stable movement	=	234	0.28	4.07
Negative positioning	-N, -, --, ---	154	0.18	2.68
Interaction processes	@	138	0.16	2.40
Negative movement	v	29	0.03	0.50
Neutral positioning	N	14	0.02	0.24
Total		5,747		100.00

a. Due to redundancy, we did not code category selection and category continua separately; that is, each coding of the above processes corresponded to one or more instances of category selection, and each coding of positioning or movement corresponded with an identity category structured as a continuum of relative identity positions.

Appendix B

Thematic Categories Identified Most Frequently in the Mission-Statement Data

Category	Frequency	Category	Frequency	Category	Frequency
Customers	202	Technology(ies)	37	Stockholders	21
Product(s)	159	Industry	37	Creation(ivity)	21
Service	134	World	36	Life	20
Company	120	Innovation	36	Distribution	20
Business(es)	120	Goals	36	Excellence	19
Value	116	Achievement	36	Commitment	19
Quality	113	Integrity	34	Trust	18
Market	101	System	30	Growth	18
Employee	101	Performance	30	Design	18
Growth	95	Team(work)	28	Relation(s)(ship)	17
People	81	Consumer	27	Citizen(ship)	17
Mission	78	Vision	25	Strategy(ies)	16
Shareholder	62	Standard	25	Partner(s)(ship)	16
Community(ies)	53	Profit(ability)	25	Material	16
Corporate(tion)	50	Organization(s)	25	Management	16
Return	48	Expectations	25	Client	16
Leader(ship)	48	Reward(s)	24	Responsibilities	15
Supplier(s)	43	Resource	24	Provider	15
Opportunity(ies)	40	Development	23	Principle(s)	15
Success	39	Level	22	Earnings	15

Note

1. The Business Computing Services and Washington State University Libraries mission statement excerpts were not part of the original data set and are used here for comparison purposes only. Unless otherwise stated, mission statement examples used here were included in the data set drawn from Abrahams (1995).

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