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Chapter VII

Business Action and Information Modeling—The Task of the New Millennium

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In this chapter, we discuss the importance of considering the action character of information when modeling information in business processes. The Language Action Perspective (LAP) is described and proposed as the perspective of choice for information modeling – now and for the future. It is emphasized that two of the most important research areas in the new millennium are to further develop LAP and to operationalize it into systems development methods. Furthermore, the generic business framework of Business Action Theory (BAT) and the requirements engineering method VIBA/SIMM (Versatile Information and Business Analysis according to the Situation adaptable work and Information Modelling Method), as representatives of LAP, are both described and positioned within LAP. This positioning is achieved by elaborating different LAP approaches and their relationships to BAT and VIBA/SIMM.

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INTRODUCTION

The Language Action Perspective (LAP) presents an alternative foundation for understanding information and information systems. Interest in LAP was born in the early 1980s (Flores and Ludlow, 1980; Goldkuhl and Lyytinen, 1982) and LAP gained worldwide popularity during the late 1980s. This was due largely to Winograd and Flores' (1986) book, which proposed LAP as a 'new foundation for design'. Today, at the dawn of a new millennium, LAP has reached a mature level. Several business-modeling frameworks are based on LAP, such as Action Workflow (Denning and Medina-Mora, 1995), SAMPO (Speech-act-based Office Modeling Approach) (Auramäki *et al.*, 1988), DEMO (Dynamic Essential Modeling of Organisations) (Dietz, 1994), and BAT (Business Action Theory) (Goldkuhl, 1998). There are also systems development and requirements engineering approaches, such as Commodious (Holm, 1996), SOMA (Semantic Object Modeling Approach) (Graham, 1998), and VIBA/SIMM (Versatile Information and Business Analysis according to the Situation adaptable work and Information Modeling Method) (Goldkuhl and Ågerfalk, 1998).

LAP is based on the theory of speech acts introduced by Austin (1962), and further developed and formalized by Searle (1969; 1979). Over the years, LAP has also incorporated other sociolinguistic theories of which the theory of communicative action by Habermas (1984) is the most prominent. The main message of LAP is that an utterance (a communication action) carries more than mere facts that tell something about something. Utterances also carry the speaker's intentions and beliefs. We do things by speaking. Austin (1962) coined the phrase 'descriptive fallacy' referring to the misconception that language is used only for descriptive purposes. He argued that language is also used for other purposes, such as promising, commanding, requesting, and so on. Thus, according to LAP, a message communicated from a speaker to a hearer consists of two components: a *propositional content* and an *illocutionary force*. The propositional content represents what is talked about, and the illocutionary force implies the type of relationship established between speaker and hearer.

When using an information technology (IT) based information system (IS) in a business, communicative acts are performed through the system. Therefore, information systems are not considered 'containers of facts' or 'tools for information transfer'. Instead, information systems are considered 'vehicles for communication' among people and organizations (Ågerfalk and Goldkuhl, 1998). In order to perceive information according to LAP and to build information systems that support this communicative view of information and business, we need to develop frameworks and method support that explicitly take the 'communicative dimension' into consideration. As mentioned above, there are several mature frameworks and methods available today that aim towards these views. To date, however, most LAP research has focused on generic communication modeling, with business modeling as the primary application. Consequently, the operationalization of LAP into systems development methods is one of the key tasks for the future.

One recent approach that aims to make explicit use of accumulated LAP knowledge for integrating business modeling and systems development is VIBA/SIMM (Goldkuhl and Ågerfalk, 1998; Ågerfalk and Goldkuhl, 1998; Cronholm *et*

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