

Community of Practice and the Special Language “Ground”

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INTRODUCTION

The creation of new knowledge is essential for survival in a global economy, for providing better public services, and for maximising profits over long timeframes. People in an organisation create knowledge, and the organisation facilitates or hinders the creation. Knowledge is created through interaction, and this interaction often results in the emergence of a community. The community invariably develops a common social, philosophical, and cognitive ground amongst the members of an organisation, and helps members to share and learn knowledge of others. In an organisation people learn and share knowledge by watching each other, by talking to each other, by reading documents written by each other to gain a *common understanding*. Common understanding helps in creating a community. The community is a dynamical eco-system where new ideas are nurtured, existing ideas pruned, and some ‘killed off’. The understanding supports quiescent changes and *paradigm shifts* as well.

A community is defined as a body of people “organized into a political, municipal, or social unity”—a body that shares values, beliefs, and aspirations and creates its own icons. All communities have an exchange system—rewards for good behaviour and opprobrium for bad. And language is amongst one of the important icons for communities as diverse as national and regional communities, and scientific and technical communities.

A specialist community uses the language of the populace and then starts to specialise the meaning of certain words within the existing stock of words of the parent language, creates its own words, and places similar restrictions on the grammar of the populace at large when used within the community.

This specialisation process results in the language of the community, and the language is called *language for special purposes* (LSP), *language for specific purposes*, or just *special language of X*, where X refers to a specific branch of human enterprise—language of physics, of business, of sports. There are further specialisations: LSP of nuclear physics, financial trading, and football.

Special languages can be differentiated from the language of everyday usage at the level of vocabulary; the differences are increasingly less discernible at the levels of grammar, syntax, and semantics. Special languages are in many ways a social phenomenon: consciously created to foster a sense of common purpose amongst a group of people and sometimes used to exclude. Special languages are key instruments of personal and group promotion. A specialist community, individually and collectively, weaves a fabric of facts and imagination (Goodman, 1978); in essence, the weave is a collection of specialist texts. We attempt to relate the development of an LSP to a specific community (of practice).

PRACTICE OF A COMMUNITY

Community of practice, or communities of practice (CoPs), is defined variously in organisational behaviour (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), in human resources management (Lesser & Storck, 2001), in discourse analysis (Clark, 1996), and by military planners (Bennet & Bennet, 2003) and computing professionals (Seely-Brown, 1998). For these authors the term CoP helps to articulate how individuals, within the context of the formally created enterprise (*the organisation* or *the firm*) identify their

beliefs (values and aspirations) with that of the enterprise over a period of time.

Common Ground and Community of Practice

Common ground (CG) is defined in terms of the interaction between two people: “The sum of their mutual, common, or joint knowledge, beliefs, and suppositions...a form of self-awareness” (Clark, 1996, pp. 93-94). The ground evolves in a principled manner.

In language-based communication, the common ground enables two language users to coordinate their actions. Clark divides the shared bases for the coordination into two types: *communal common ground*, defining cultural communities, and *personal common ground*, helping to distinguish between friends and strangers. The communal common ground is “a large mental encyclopaedia...divided into chapters by cultural communities” (Clark, 1996, p. 106). The communal CG could be divided into five content areas: human nature—“people in general”; cultural facts, norms, and procedures; and “ineffable experiences that others cannot understand unless they have them; grading of information; and communal lexicon.” Cultural communities develop communal lexicon, and “many inferences are based narrowly on the language communities we know some one belongs to [...] Word knowledge [...] divides into [...] sets of word conventions in individual communities.” Such lexicons include dialects, technical terminology, ‘academese’, and ‘medicalese’ (Clark, 1996, p. 107): essentially the language of individual communities or Language for Special Purposes of the community.

The *personal common ground* (PCG) relies on ‘joint personal experiences’: strangers share no PCG, acquaintances have limited PCG, friends have extensive PCG, and intimates have extensive PCG and private information. The personal *lexicon* facilitates communication between acquaintances, friends, and intimates. This lexicon appears to be that of everyday language.

Community Practice and Knowledge Creation

For Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), knowledge is created through a cyclical process of the tacitly held experience-based knowledge being converted into formalised, symbolic, and publicly available *explicit* knowledge, and vice versa. The word *tacit* is rooted in the Latin *tacitus* meaning ‘silent’, and its synonyms include *understood*, *implied*, *unexpressed*, and *silent*. ‘Explicit’ contrariwise means ‘to unfold’, and its synonyms include *categorical*, *definite*, *express*, or *specific*. There are two exemplar instances of how tacit knowledge is transferred from a practitioner to another within an organisation or across organisations. Heath and Luff (1996) describe how operators in the control room of an underground railway system learn from a (more experienced) colleague by watching the colleague carefully while he or she is involved in making critical decisions. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p. 63) describe how an innovative team at Matsushita Electric Company (Japan), comprising production engineers and software developers, involved in the design of a home bakery, learnt the intricacies of bread making from a well-known master baker at an Osaka hotel, especially the final twist of the dough before the master placed the dough in the oven. The final twist was then engineered within Matsushita’s home bakery system, which could then be used to make bread of about the same quality as that bought from a bakery. Both groups—the underground operators within an organisation, and the production engineers/software developers in one organisation and the master baker in another—learnt the knowledge, which is seldom articulated.

Explicit knowledge, formalised and symbolically coded, is grounded in one or more theories, it is usually independent of the context, and the explication is generally equated with rationality. The developments in science, engineering, and lately in biomedicine, demonstrate the triumph of rationalism. The individual is almost excluded in the explicit articulation of knowledge, parenthesised or rendered into numbers in a footnote. The use of math-

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