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# Subversive linguistic conventions in panel-based decision making: A group level study

## *Introduction*

This paper considers the negotiated performance of business funding panels. The panels are the decision-making unit for each stage of a competition that distributes millions of pounds in startup funding to UK businesses every year. Environments such as that studied in this paper are peripheral, interstitial spaces that sit beyond the bounds of conventional organisational attention, yet they also represent concentrations of prevailing behaviours and attitudes in the instrumental and relational practices they espouse. In observing them, we not only strengthen our understanding of the specific context, but we are able to see organisational practice more generally reflected back at us. Analogous to this study is the study of conventional work meetings, which, as Scott et al. (2012, p.128) state, “*are most commonly analyzed merely as a context for the exploration of other variables*”, as opposed to being considered discretely as units of analysis for understanding and improving how such small group formats are conducted.

Following the convention in ethnographic research to make the *familiar seem strange* (Copland & Creese, 2015), this study explores the inner workings of judging panels for investment. We consider the coalescing of linguistic and social practices and expose how structures of authority and power are reproduced among relative strangers. There has been some limited enquiry into the social dynamics of assessment panels (see: Grant et al., 2000; Van Arensbergen et al., 2014), but opportunities to observe such contexts in depth and over a sustained period are hard to come by, particularly in the business environment, due to sensitivity over access to proprietary intellectual property, practical restrictions, or simply discomfort at being observed. The literature on work meetings demonstrates that there is, nonetheless, a vibrant discourse on such contexts and that understanding them is invaluable to organisations (Rogelberg et al., 2007). Such literature, however, is dominated by the study of meetings that take place within settled organisational environments, with familiar teams for whom meetings form part of the normal work course. This study has been given privileged access to a panel decision-making process that is formed typically of high status, deliberately selected judges, who have not worked together before. The panels make decisions that are pivotal for the candidate businesses being considered. This is an example of a convention within organisational practice that is atypical, yet highly instrumental. The significance of the research lies in the insights it offers on a model that is commonly deployed in highly instrumental settings (such as job interviews, research grant funding and probation reviews), yet rarely scrutinised.

## *Methods*

The project began in 2018 and has built a dataset of 110 charted funding pitches with follow-up Q&A, 39 panel observation sessions with field diaries and reflections, 38 in-depth interviews with competition applicants, two in-depth interviews with judges, and three in-depth interviews with the competition organisers. The work is ongoing, but it is now at a stage where analysis and insights can be yielded from the data. Details of the data collected over the course of the project to date can be found in table 1 below.

Year	Data Type	Count
2022	Applicant interviews	4
	Competition Organiser Interviews	3
	Judge interviews	2
2021	Interim Report for organisation	1
	Panel Observations	2
	Pitch/Q&A Charting	20
	Applicant interviews	34
2019	Report Briefing with participant organisation	1
	Interim Report for organisation	1
	Panel Observations	20
	Pitch/Q&A Charting	50
2018	Report Briefing with participant organisation	1
	Interim Report for organisation	1
	Panel Observations	17
	Pitch/Q&A Charting	40

Table 1 Project Data Set (to date)

The study uses linguistic ethnography as its methodological basis and seeks to situate the prevailing practices of the panels within the broader social structures of power and influence that the judges are representative of. Maybin and Tusting (2011, p.12) note that, “[t]he challenges of bringing together linguistic and social theoretical frameworks of explanation are formidable.” The work carried-out in this study has allowed distinct patterns and conventions to be identified and thus considered within meso and institutional contexts beyond the interactions within the panels themselves.

### *Initial Findings*

The following description of findings emerge principally from our observations and reflective notes, triangulated where relevant via our direct contact with the competition applicants, organisers and judges.

#### *The preparation paradox*

All judges would receive the candidates’ applications in advance, but it was apparent that some had done the preparation and some had not. Those who had done the preparation would invariably lament how onerous it was in the informal introductory exchanges at the start of the day. They would also arrive at the panel with paperwork, notes and print-outs. Paradoxically, the most vocal panel members were overwhelmingly those who had not ‘done their homework’. In interviews with the competition organisers, they noted this trend, recalling specific judges who they could tell had not read the applications, yet would be a dominant voice in discussions. Although our study is not considering gender as a specific analytical focus, there was a pronounced gender divide in this trend, women would often join panels with evidently diligent preparation and then be spoken-over by unprepared men throughout the day.

### *Individual credibility*

Considerable attention of the panel members is devoted towards establishing their own legitimacy and credibility. An impact of this was that the job of the panel (to evaluate applications for funding) manifested as a secondary priority for many judges. Instead, the panel appears to be a networking opportunity and contributing to discussion was a vehicle for this. Therefore, a discussion about an application could often not move far beyond semantic exchanges. This trend also brought with it a common reliance on a subjective basis for evaluation. Apparent judgements were often substantiated with a personal anecdote or a CV vignette, such as: "I used to be a consultant in this area so..." or "I've had some experience in this area" or even "I have a very good friend who does this...". This is interpreted as being a posturing device for the benefit of establishing legitimacy with other panel members rather than offering critical opinions on the applications they are discussing.

### *Establish a hierarchy*

One of the most marked conventions that panels always went through early was the polite and implicit negotiation of a hierarchy. The hierarchy was then harnessed throughout the judges' deliberations to legitimise decisions, or for individuals to withdraw from contributing (on the grounds of not being identified as an expert on the topic). This removes the role of discussion from the panel and diminishes its ability to use collective deliberation as a means of decision making. This typically manifested as polite reciprocal affirmation of status, such as "you're far more qualified than me to judge this one", "no, you're the expert here." This polite negotiation formed informal hierarchies of expertise that gave the panel members a felt sense of legitimacy in their decision making and determined implicitly who was 'responsible' for different decisions. However, this often undermined or bypassed open discussion and robust group consensus.

### *The expert paradox*

Regularly, an expert (informally elected by the group) would set out a position that articulated the issues with an application that was built around their experience as an 'expert'. In one panel, when judging a vegan food product, a judge (who was vegan) discredited the application on the basis that they 'had never seen or heard of this product, so it can't be making any traction'. Often an application received a categorically negative evaluation from an 'expert judge' in a way that predicated their judgement on their status. We contend that by being singled-out as the expert, a judge is able to appeal to their authority as an expert without needing to substantiate how they have evaluated an application. When under pressure for time, it is therefore easy to discredit an application based on one's bestowed authority rather than debate its substantive strengths and weaknesses, since the panel has already deferred to that individual. This meant that when the panel deferred to the expert, the application invariably was dismissed and thus there was a sense of paradox since the person deemed best placed to make a judgement rarely substantiated their judgement.

### *Contribution momentum*

Once someone had been 'listened to' during the discussion, they would import that legitimacy into later discussions. This would often result in them entering into a discussion but with seemingly less substantive reasons. For example, one judge established himself as a

legitimate voice in relation to more complicated science-based applications and then used that legitimacy to dominate a later discussion based on an individual personal experience relating to a leg injury. What we see is a conflation between being listened to on one subject and being privileged to speak on any subject at all. This momentum of contribution means that judges would base their opinions on less and less well substantiated positions as the panel progressed.

### *Make it up and discredit it*

When a panel is struggling to understand something, they 'make up' what they think the applicant means and then they discredit the proposal. Although there is a variety of reasons why panels might do this, the trend was pronounced. Panel members would preface their contribution to the discussions with "I think what they're trying to do is...", they would then propose an explanation to the other judges in their own words and follow this with why they thought this would not work or was ill-conceived. The trend always resulted in a discrediting or rejection of the proposition. Thus, when we observed the linguistic overture of "I think what they're doing is..." we knew we were about to witness the panel rejecting an application.

### *'I don't get it'*

Making it up and discrediting it, was closely linked to another linguistic trope among the panels. "I don't get it" is a phrase used almost every time a panel sits. When someone says, "I don't get it", they are setting out a position to discredit. 'I don't get it' communicates a judgement that if they do not understand then it is unlikely to be a viable proposition.

### *Conflicts of interest*

Another prevailing trend was the grey area of 'conflicts of interest'; when a panel member declared a conflict, they tended to continue to contribute to discussions despite the conflict. At the end of the day when final decisions were being made, they often made an effort to advocate on behalf of the business for which they had declared an interest. This may be as unequivocal as 'selling' the business or as subtle as offering broader context or information relating to the business. There were comments such as "I've seen them pitch better than that" or offering an explanation for why their application may have been weaker. There were stand-out examples of this where panel members ended up passionately (and successfully) 'selling' a business to the other panel members (the business progressed in the competition). There was a further example where a judge dominated the deliberations, during which they revealed that their own business would directly benefit if the applicant were to be awarded funding.

## *Conclusion*

Our initial discussions in response to the data revolve around ideas of the epistemic stance of the panel members. The manifest dominant stance of most judges is on their own individual epistemic sovereignty and of concern for their legitimacy within the group. There is a relationship between the motivation to assert and establish oneself within a group and the prevalence of relying on subjective reasoning or circumstantial authority. This relationship stands to debase or diminish the decision-making process and potentially disempower the panel as a group. We see this particularly with the preparation paradox, where the lack of

preparation leads judges to seek to constitute their legitimacy through their verbal contributions as opposed to having fostered it through their preparation. We also note that in an environment where there is no formal intervention to establish the panel's identity as a group, the judges default to constructing their own individual identity. There are strong performative and interactive forces that preclude the panel from functioning as a group, yet there are interventions that could be developed to contain the prevailing dynamics that currently privilege the loudest and most unconstructive voices as opposed to the most constructive opinions, appeal to situational authority as opposed to considered evaluation, and are open to explicit corruption and oppression as opposed to implicit transparency and fairness.

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