TALKING THE WALK

BRIDGING FORMALITY AND INFORMALITY IN MICRO AND SMALL ENTERPRISES

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how accounting talk shapes shared understandings and bridges the tension between formality and informality in micro and small enterprises (MSEs). Drawing on qualitative data from a case study of a Swedish MSE, including observations and semi-structured interviews, the study examines the co-creation and use of a prioritization system. Although initially met with resistance, the system gained relevance through dialogue rather than formal implementation. The findings demonstrate how accounting talk functions as a sensemaking mechanism but also as a vehicle for strategic alignment in the absence of formal structures. The study introduces the concept of higher-order metaphors, a shared language that encapsulates organizational priorities, and shows how these enable firms to internalize strategic goals in the absence of formal systems and bureaucratic constraints. By studying accounting talk within the MSE context, this study offers new insights into how such talk may substitute for formal systems and address organizational tensions, extending existing research into less formalized organizational settings.

Keywords:
Accounting talk, informality, metaphors, micro and small enterprises, sensemaking

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The COO entered the meeting room, having just ended a call. *"Sorry I'm a bit late"* he said as he joined the CEO, CFO, and the four salespeople. He had prepared a task for the group, a hypothetical hiring exercise. *"If we were to bring in someone new, what would we look for?"* he asked.

The sales team quickly agreed: they needed a cold caller - someone to generate new leads and alleviate some of the pressure on their already full plates. *"No one likes doing cold calls"* one salesperson admitted. However, the CEO disagreed. *"We don't need more cold calls. We need someone who can close deals. That's the real bottleneck right now"*.

The conversation revealed a subtle divide. While the sales team prioritized lead generation, leadership was focused on deal conversion. Picking up on this, the COO took the floor again, opening a new spreadsheet. *"I want us to practice how to evaluate and prioritize leads"* he announced. *"This is how I think about prioritization"*.

As he displayed the spreadsheet, it became clear that no one, not even the CEO, was familiar with it. The sheet contained four scoring categories (Order value, PR value, Realization value and ROI value) and an overall score in a fifth column, *"I don't personally use this system"* the COO admitted somewhat proudly. *"I rely on gut feeling when prioritizing leads. But I started thinking about how my gut feeling actually works - and this is pretty much it!"*

This led to a discussion about what high and low values for *"Order value"* and *"PR value"* actually signified, and the management communicated the need to balance different dimensions when allocating time and resources. Through these conversations, the system itself came to life and became better understood by the participants. Its meaning and purpose were clarified through use and co-creation. However, the system in its tangible, structured form was met with resistance, as expressed by one salesperson who remarked, *"But we're not supposed to be engineers assigning grades left and right, we shouldn't build bureaucracy"*.

1.2. Research Gap

The above scenario aligns closely with the scholarly discourse on accounting talk, a concept well-established within the accounting literature, exploring the intersection of informal conversation and formal accounting information. Early conceptualizations by Ahrens (1997) describe accounting talk as the integration of financial and operational knowledge through verbal exchanges that actively produce new organizational insights rather than merely communicating pre-existing data. Subsequent studies have expanded upon this notion, examining how accounting talk facilitates organizational change (Baker et al., 2022; Hall, 2010), assists in navigating ambiguous financial environments (Abrahamsson et al., 2016), and shapes managerial actions through strategic linguistic choices, such as the effective use of metaphors (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016). For instance, Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016) demonstrate how metaphors drawn from everyday life help bridge gaps between financial literacy and operational understanding, allowing employees to internalize and act upon financial priorities without needing complex numeric metrics. Abrahamsson et al. (2016), in turn, highlight the critical role of verbal exchanges in reducing ambiguity and aligning organizational actions with strategic objectives, showing how accounting conversations gradually transform ambiguous data into actionable insights. Current literature of accounting talk hence shows that accounting information becomes meaningful via talk (Ahrens, 1997) and that managers even tend to favor verbal communication (Hall, 2010).

Despite these advancements, the current literature predominantly explores accounting talk within the context of large organizations characterized by structured processes, formalized communication channels, and substantial resources for detailed data analysis (Abrahamsson et al., 2016; Ahrens, 1997; Baker et al., 2022; Fauré and Rouleau, 2011; Kraus and Strömsten, 2016; Preston, 1986; Puyou, 2018). Large firms benefit from abundant resources for information gathering and processing, which enables a more comprehensive strategic decision-making (Rogers, Miller, and Judge, 1999; Busenitz and Barney, 1997). Decisions are typically subject to organizational scrutiny, cross-functional collaboration, and multiple layers of review, which diffuse individual contributions (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992; Busenitz and Barney, 1997).

In contrast, micro and small enterprises (MSEs), defined by the European Commission. (n.d.) as businesses with fewer than 50 employees and a turnover below EUR 10 million, operate in fundamentally different conditions. These firms are often characterized by informal management styles, centralized authority, limited access to formal data systems, and a reliance on tacit knowledge and gut feeling in decision-making (Liberman-Yaconi et al., 2009; Berrone et al., 2013; Greenbank, 1999; McCarthy, 2003). Unlike their larger counterparts, smaller firms have very few (if any) individuals available for systematically processing complex information, making delegation of decision-making impractical which favors a concentration of the discretion in the hands of the owner–manager (Smith et al., 1988).

This context shapes how financial and strategic decisions are made. MSE managers often juggle responsibilities across various domains (e.g. finance, marketing, human resources) without necessarily having deep expertise in any one area (Jocumsen, 2004; Matlay, 1999; Greenbank, 1999). Operational and managerial tasks blur together, further reinforcing a tendency toward ad hoc and intuitive decision-making (Atuahene-Gima and Li, 2004). As such, strategic choices tend to be less formalized and more centralized than in large organizations (Child, 1973). The scarcity of human- and data resources limits the feasibility of deploying formal procedures or comprehensive documentation, leading to decisions instead emerging from spontaneous conversations and situational judgment (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988; Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992).

Further, there is limited empirical understanding of how accounting systems are actually used in MSEs. Studies have noted that formal accounting tools are often resisted or only partially adopted, as they are perceived to be too rigid, time-consuming, or detached from the everyday operational realities of small business management (Child, 1973; Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988). Given this backdrop, examining accounting talk within MSEs provides an opportunity to gain valuable insights into these informal and intuitive managerial practices. The opening paragraphs of the introduction highlight how managers use accounting representations as a basis for discussion, while also drawing attention to the tension between the need to formalize decision-making and the desire to avoid creating overly bureaucratic processes.

In summary, by extending the investigation of accounting talk into the understudied context of MSEs, this thesis intends to contribute novel insights into how conversations bridge subjective intuition and structured systems.

1.3. Research Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate how informal verbal exchanges about accounting information, referred to as “accounting talk”, bring meaning to accounting information and bridge tension between formality and informality within micro and small enterprises. Employing qualitative methods, including naturalistic observations and semi structured interviews, this research seeks to provide nuanced insights into the everyday practices of accounting talk in MSE settings. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to the current accounting talk literature by increasing the understanding of how accounting talk functions in smaller organizations.

To achieve this objective, the following research questions will guide the study:

1. In what ways does accounting talk shape shared understandings of strategic priorities in micro and small enterprises?
2. How is accounting talk used to resolve tensions between formality and informality in micro and small enterprises?

1.4. Thesis Disposition

The upcoming sections of this study are structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review, beginning with an exploration of accounting talk, including its conceptual foundations and role in managerial decision-making. This is followed by a discussion of sensemaking theory and how it relates to accounting talk. Section 3 outlines the methodology, detailing the research design, data collection across three phases, and the analytical techniques employed, including thematic coding and conversation analysis. Section 4 introduces the empirical material, drawn primarily from a full-day workshop and recurring Monday meetings. In Section 5, we discuss the findings, focusing on the co-creation of a language and how it was leveraged to mediate tensions between formality and informality. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper with a summary of contributions and implications for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Accounting Talk

"Managers work with words". This classic observation by Jönsson (1998, p. 411) captures the essence of what research calls "accounting talk", the verbal communication of accounting information in organizations (Ahrens, 1997). Rather than numbers speaking for themselves, it is through conversation, discussion, and storytelling that accounting data gain meaning and influence. A growing body of literature has emerged around accounting talk, examining how organizational actors use language to interpret figures, convey financial information, and shape decisions.

2.1.1. Conceptual Foundations of Accounting Talk

Early accounting scholars argued for a linguistic turn, urging researchers to align accounting research with actual managerial conversation (Jönsson, 1998). Jönsson (1998) emphasized that managers operate through dialogue, so "the use of accounting information in such conversation should be studied" (Jönsson, 1998, p.411). This laid a conceptual foundation for accounting talk to understand how accounting figures are invoked and negotiated in everyday managerial work. At its core, accounting talk refers to the verbal use and discussion of accounting information (budgets, performance metrics, costs, etc.) within organizational dialogues. Rather than focusing solely on formal reports or spreadsheets, this perspective highlights how those numbers come alive in talk. As Hall (2010) observes, it is "primarily through talk rather than through written reports that accounting information becomes implicated in managerial work" (Hall, 2010, p. 302). In other words, numbers gain relevance only once they are interpreted and discussed. This notion is further elaborated by Englund & Gerdin, (2014) that show that middle managers both use accounting information to confirm already held assumptions of operational realities yet also use their knowledge of operational realities to give flavour to the accounting information. They further show that organizational actors mobilize different accounting information to paint a generalized picture of the organizational reality.

Ahrens' (1997) influential study conceptualized the foundation of accounting talk. Studying British and German breweries, Ahrens showed that accounting talk is a form of sensemaking whereby accounting is related to other ways of knowing the organization, thereby making it meaningful to its members (Ahrens, 1997). His cross-cultural comparison illustrated that what managers do with accounting in conversation, the analogies they draw, the issues they link to financial results, shapes what is known and acted upon. Similarly, Jönsson and Solli (1993) found that accounting information had to be communicated differently across organizational levels. Managers tailored their financial discussions to different people at different levels (Jönsson and Solli, 1993). A consistent message in these foundational works is that accounting is not a neutral, technical input to decisions, it is social and linguistic. The eventual effect of any accounting system is "highly dependent on whether and how managers use accounting information in verbal communications" (Hall, 2010, p. 307). This underscores how accounting talk is socially embedded, and other authors has further shown how accounting talk is shaped by social phenomena such as empathy, passion, and trust (Costa et al., 2019; Baxter et al., 2019, p. 25; Vosselman & Van der Meer-Kooistra, 2009; Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Accounting talk is thus conceptualized as the critical link between accounting information and decision-making, the medium through which accounting acquires meaning, relevance, and influence.

2.1.2. Accounting Talk as a Vehicle for Sensemaking and Sensegiving

Because talk is the medium through which accounting is understood, it plays a central role in sensemaking and sensegiving. Several studies demonstrate that important decisions emerge from the discussions around the numbers rather than from the numbers alone (Preston, 1986; Hall, 2010; Fauré and Rouleau, 2011; Goretzki et al., 2018; Abrahamsson et al., 2016). Kraus and Strömsten (2016) more recent work adds further nuance by showing that, in the Ericsson–Vodafone relationship, accounting talk is intertwined with the mobilisation of resource, process and meaning power, illustrating how conversation about numbers can reshape inter‑firm power dynamics and thus steer subsequent action. In a complementary vein, Puyou (2018) highlights how systems of secrecy (successive rounds of confidences and gossip) allow management accountants to calibrate what is revealed to whom, thereby preserving trust while still enabling critical reflection around the figures. Together, these studies reinforce the idea that accounting information only becomes consequential once it is made sense of and given meaning to.

Hall (2010) notes that managers make sense of performance measures and budgets by talking them through, asking questions, debating implications and relating figures to operational concerns. Verbal interaction allows managers to tailor accounting information to the situation at hand, clarify ambiguities and reach a shared understanding before decisions are made. In fact, management accountants often anticipate how others will react to the figures and adjust their presentations accordingly (Jönsson and Solli, 1993). Research indicates that when disseminating accounting information, managers must reformulate it, adapting it to the context of their audiences (Preston, 1986). By delivering different messages to different stakeholders, they ensure that the numbers are meaningful and actionable for each group.

Accounting talk has also been shown to facilitate and shape organizational change. Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016) provide a vivid case: in a home-care organization, a manager acted as a change agent by using accounting language and metaphors in face-to-face communication with care workers. By framing an efficiency-improvement initiative in every-day terms, the manager translated an abstract financial target into familiar concepts for staff. As Young (2013) notes, metaphors and language serve to highlight certain features while downplaying others, shaping what is considered valuable. Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016) found that the use of accounting metaphors in dialogue was pivotal in “determining the trajectory of internal change processes” (p. 215). Kraus and Strömsten (2016) extends this insight by showing that language is central not only to make sense but also to the mobilisation of power, enabling a dominant partner to reconfigure both inter-firm and internal controls. This aligns with earlier observations that managerial work is oriented toward change and that communication and sensemaking is central to guiding that change (Jönsson, 1998).

Abrahamsson et al. (2016) further advance this discussion by investigating how the sensemaking process in accounting talk emerges from the inherent ambiguity of accounting information. Their study shows that when multiple aspects of organizational realities are measured, accounting numbers can present contradictory messages, creating an ambiguous setting that necessitates discussion. This ambiguity triggers a process of sensemaking in which talk serves to bridge gaps and create different narratives as actors align accounting information with operational realities. In doing so, accounting numbers progressively evolve from sources of confusion to tools that clarify logical cause-and-effect relationships and inform decision-making. Thus, according to Abrahamsson et al. (2016), accounting talk both creates and minimizes ambiguity within organizations, acting as a catalyst for developing clearer metrics and directing future inquiry. They also demonstrate how the studied group used their constructed narrative of necessary changes to develop new performance measures, which they then employed to make sense and influence perceptions.

The conversational aspect of accounting is further elaborated by Goretzki et al. (2018), who demonstrate how performance indicators become persuasive not through their intrinsic objectivity, but as a result of interactions. In performance-review meetings, actors engaged in what they describe as “framing contests” which are strategic efforts to define and persuade others by selectively mobilizing accounting numbers. Their findings, together with those of Kraus and Strömsten (2016), reinforce the view that accounting talk is not simply descriptive but performative. Rather than reflecting a static reality, accounting metrics become flexible rhetorical resources through which strategic narratives are advanced and contested. Puyou (2018) adds that the format of this talk, specifically, the alternation between private confidences and wider gossip, can itself serve as a managerial technique by structuring informal information flows and helps actors cope with the tensions of managing interdependencies while pursuing individually specified targets.

Other studies echo the importance of accounting talk in decision and planning forums. Fauré and Rouleau (2011) examined budget-making and found that accountants’ discursive skills were crucial in reconciling strategic goals with operational realities. Middle managers acted as translators, using talk to make budget numbers understandable at different levels and to negotiate compromises. Likewise, Ahrens (1997) observed that routine operational decisions in breweries were profoundly shaped by how financial and non-financial issues were discussed together. British managers used informal financial talk to justify actions, whereas German managers invoked accounting in more formal, technical terms, a difference that influenced decision-making styles. Methodological advances are also sharpening our grasp of these dynamics: Baker et al. (2022) demonstrate how conversation analysis can capture the emotional perspectives (eg. humour, anxiety, and aggression) that infuse accounting exchanges, offering a fine-grained lens on how subject positions are negotiated around performance measures.

Across this research, a common theme emerges: accounting talk is a vehicle for sensemaking and sensegiving. Through such talk, actors weigh alternatives, negotiate power relations and mobilise support for preferred actions by couching them in accounting terms. Accordingly, organizational decisions and changes are shaped by the conversational contexts in which accounting data are questioned, reframed and endowed with meaning.

2.2. Sensemaking

2.2.1. Discursive Model of Sensemaking

The research on accounting talk shifts our understanding of accounting in organizations from a technical view to a communicative one. Rather than seeing accounting merely as a collection of numbers and reports, these studies portray it as an ongoing conversation through which meaning is constructed, contested, and transformed. Central to this process is sensemaking, a dynamic activity in which managers and accountants interpret ambiguous accounting information to create coherent frames of reference that guide decision-making and action (Abrahamsson et al., 2016).

To conceptualize accounting talk as a strategic use of sensemaking, Cornelissen's (2012) dual-dimensional model, comprising "role-situated commitments" and "salience of others' expectations", offers a valuable lens (see Figure 1). Cornelissen (2012) develops a model for understanding how organizational actors create sense under pressure, arguing that the strength and interplay of these two dimensions dictate the strategy an actor employs.

The first dimension, "role-situated commitments", refers to the extent to which an individual is dedicated to carrying out the specific activities that are integral to their professional role within an organization. This commitment influences how professionals approach their tasks and can also shape their identity within the organization. In turn, this identity may further reinforce the commitment to perform role related tasks. Cornelissen (2012) stresses that it is important to distinguish this commitment from personal identification with the role. In other words, an individual may display a strong dedication to fulfilling their role related tasks without necessarily identifying with the role on a personal level.

The second dimension, "salience of others' expectations", captures the degree to which an individual is influenced by the expectations of others. This dimension encompasses both an awareness of what others expect and the significance attributed to these expectations in guiding thoughts and behavior. It becomes particularly relevant in situations where power differences exist and where external pressures can strongly shape an actor's decisions.

Cornelissen (2012) underlines that the model represents a continuous process. When the salience of others' expectations is high and role situated commitments are relatively weak, the actor is inclined to align their views with those of more dominant or influential figures. Conversely, as external pressures weaken and the actor's commitment to their own perspective increases, strategies emerge that enable the actor to uphold their own view.

Based on the interplay of these two dimensions, Cornelissen's (2012) model categorizes sensemaking into three strategies: shifting, framing, and narration. Shifting occurs when external expectations dominate and the actor's personal commitments are not sufficiently strong to challenge those expectations. In this case, the actor tends to adjust their own views to match the strongly communicated opinions of others. They use metaphors to align their positions with the positions of others. As the actor begins to assert a stronger commitment to their own perspective and external influences diminish, a framing strategy is employed. Framing involves the active negotiation and integration of one's own view with the expectations of others, often through the use of metaphors. These metaphors help to bridge differences by creating shared interpretative boundaries. Finally, when external expectations are ambiguous or less pronounced and the actor maintains a strong commitment to their own view, narration becomes the preferred strategy. Under narration, the actor engages in internal deliberation to construct a coherent narrative by blending metaphors that logically links the current state with a desired future state, thereby legitimizing a particular course of action while pre-empting potential criticisms.

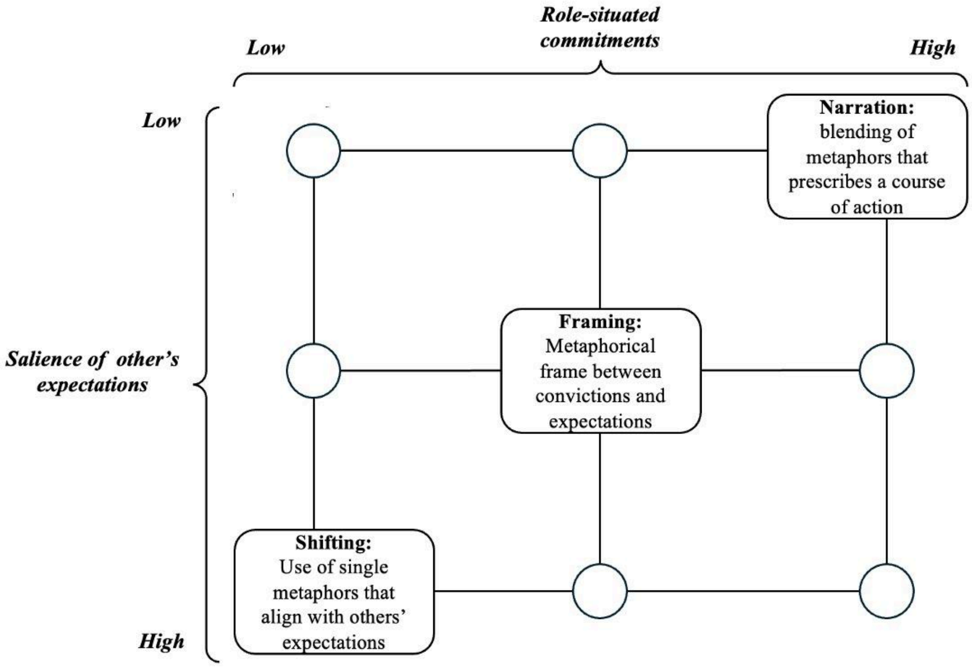

Figure 1. A Discursive model of sensemaking: Process and conditions (Cornelissen, 2012)

2.2.2. Accounting Talk Through the Discursive Model of Sensemaking

Cornelissen's (2012) model of sensemaking builds on three ways of using metaphors to sensemake. As we have shown, the literature on accounting talk shows that using metaphors and drawing on other operational knowledge bases is an integral part of accounting talk (Ahrens, 1997; Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Young, 2013). Accounting talk is in its most fundamental form a way to make sense, not only of numbers but also of people, and hence Cornelissen's (2012) framework has the possibility to pinpoint themes in the current literature. Bellow we highlight four example case studies from the accounting talk literature (Fauré and Rouleau, 2011; Abrahamsson et al., 2016; Kraus and Strömsten, 2016; Puyou, 2018) showing that in large organizations accounting talk primarily acts as a sensemaking device via the creation of narratives or conversely strategically shifting towards others' expectations.

Fauré and Rouleau (2011) investigate the interactions between accountants and middle managers in the fourth largest construction firm in France, focusing specifically on the talk that occurs during budgeting conversations. In these conversations, talk around numbers is used to make figures seem "plausible" or "acceptable," depending on the audience and the accountability relationships at play (Fauré & Rouleau, 2011, p. 176). Viewed through

Cornelissen’s (2012) framework of sensemaking, this use of accounting talk corresponds to the discursive strategy of strategic shifting. According to Cornelissen (2012), strategic shifting occurs when actors adapt their language to align with perceived expectations in order to maintain legitimacy. The budgeting conversations in Fauré and Rouleau’s study exemplify that rather than constructing coherent narratives or reframing strategic issues, accountants and managers tactically adjust their talk to preserve legitimacy and meet expectations. For instance, when a controller justifies the creation of an artificial budget line by stating “you have to smooth results, otherwise, everybody gets upset” (Fauré & Rouleau, 2011, p. 178), it becomes clear that the goal is not numerical accuracy but discursive acceptability. Here, accounting talk functions as a way to momentarily stabilize meaning and fulfill accountability demands, reinforcing Cornelissen’s (2012) idea that under social pressure, professionals engage in talk that signals conformity more than critical reflection or storytelling.

Another example of shifting is shown by Puyou (2018), which examines how management accountants in a large multinational firm use secrecy, in the form of confidences and gossip, as a discursive strategy to navigate conflicting demands. The study reveals how these accountants engage in private, informal talk to both collect sensitive information and manage its selective disclosure. This kind of talk is highly strategic, not only because of what is said, but because of how and to whom it is said. Viewed through Cornelissen’s (2012) sensemaking framework, this communicative behavior closely aligns with the strategy of strategic shifting. In the author’s case study, the accountants did not present unified narratives or challenges, rather, they adjusted their language and disclosures across audiences to maintain trust and perceived neutrality. For example, a regional management accountant explains that “When I report news [to the summit], I never unpack them in one block, I give hints” (Puyou, 2018, p. 20), signaling the deliberate and situational modulation of accounting talk to adhere to the prevailing expectations of their roles. Hence, under Cornelissen’s (2012) lens, this subtle, tactical adjustments in communication exemplify strategic shifting, where talk is used to carefully navigate conflicting accountabilities and preserve one’s professional legitimacy.

Abrahamsson et al. (2016) instead show that the middle managers in their study, a large manufacturing company that employs 2,300 people worldwide, constructed a narrative about necessary organizational changes and used newly developed performance measures to communicate this narrative and influence the front-line engineers. Hence according to the sensemaking framework by Cornelissen (2012), the middle managers together develop a narrative around a course of action they deemed logical. They then use accounting talk, via the construction of new performance measures, to communicate this narrative to frontline engineers at the construction department. The group of middle managers created metrics such as "Number of late machine order changes" (Abrahamsson et al., 2016 p. 177) which arguably acts as a metaphor for their narrative that one of the problems needing to be addressed is the late changes to the machines made by the engineers. The middle managers further conclude that frontline engineers should not get any "special treatment" which also acts as a metaphor for the managers' narrative about frontline engineers having received unjustified special treatments in the past. Hence, viewing the case study by Abrahamsson et al. (2016) through the lens of Cornelissen (2012), accounting talk is used in the "blending of metaphors that prescribe a course of action" (Cornelissen, 2012 p. 128) which is his definition of the sensemaking strategy he terms "narration".

Kraus and Strömsten (2016) similarly show how Vodafone, as the more powerful customer in its relationship with the dependent supplier Ericsson, creates a narrative by drawing on specific accounting language and metrics. Their case study is an example of accounting talk in a between-firm setting. Vodafone's narrative of the importance of cost control was reinforced through the formalized structure of inter-firm "Club" meetings, where Vodafone could assert control over the agenda and priorities. Ericsson, lacking sufficient bargaining power, began adjusting its internal accounting talk to align with Vodafone's financial expectations. For instance, Vodafone's purchasing director emphasized the importance of demonstrating global cost synergies to the financial markets, prompting Ericsson managers to adopt a vocabulary centered around margin control, benchmark pricing, and customer-centric cost logic (Kraus and Strömsten, 2016). From Cornelissen's (2012) perspective, this marks a case of narration by Vodafone where they draw on specific accounting metrics in talk, hence giving voice to the changing focus from innovation to cost control. Ericsson on the other hand adopts a shifting approach whereby they make sense by adopting the language used by Vodafone. As a result, Ericsson managers began legitimizing Vodafone's narratives and retrospectively justify the change, portraying the shift as a logical evolution rather than a coerced loss of autonomy. Hence, the case not only exemplifies shifting as a discursive strategy but also shows how powerful actors, here Vodafone, can actively leverage narration and institutionalize their preferred expectations, reducing the space for dispute and reasserting control.

In contrast to the shifting-narration dynamic found in the previous large organizations, Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016) presents a unique example of successful framing, enabled by a small, cohesive organizational structure. The case is set in a Swedish municipal homecare unit, employing 25 home helpers, that is undergoing financial reform. A local change agent led a transformation in how accounting information was understood and used by staff. The local unit was characterized by high levels of role specific commitments from both the manager carrying out the change process but also by the caretakers. The manager was committed to the role of carrying out the change process, while the caregivers were committed to not reduce the quality of care they were giving. Although the authors conclude that little tensions arose during the meetings, it is evident that the caregivers voiced their concerns about having to do less caregiving in favor of the financial perspective. Cornelissen (2012) argues that a strategy to make sense in such situations is by using metaphors to frame and mediate both parties' expectations. This case study is an example of framing in how the manager acknowledges the caregivers expectations by stating that as long as they report the overtime spent, there is no need to reduce the care given to the patients. This moves the cognitive frames from "either or" and positions it as "both and".

However, as Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016) themselves emphasise, their study is based on a relatively small sub-unit, and many other accounting talk studies have been undertaken in much larger organizational settings. We agree with their argumentation that in larger organizations, internal change agents may have far more limited ability and opportunity to directly initiate and influence organizational change processes by talking accounting to all members at once, which as we have shown could be seen as a form of framing activity. Although our analysis of prior literature suggests that the use of accounting talk and sensemaking strategies may vary depending on the size of the organization studied, it remains, as of current, unclear whether this pattern is coincidental or truly linked to organizational size. Nevertheless, the analysis highlights (see Figure 2) that studies of accounting talk in smaller organizations or subunits, such as Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016), raises the intriguing possibility that the specific accounting talk strategies underpinning framing in a sensemaking effort may be particularly dependent on organizational scale and social proximity, suggesting an avenue for further research of accounting talk in smaller firm contexts.

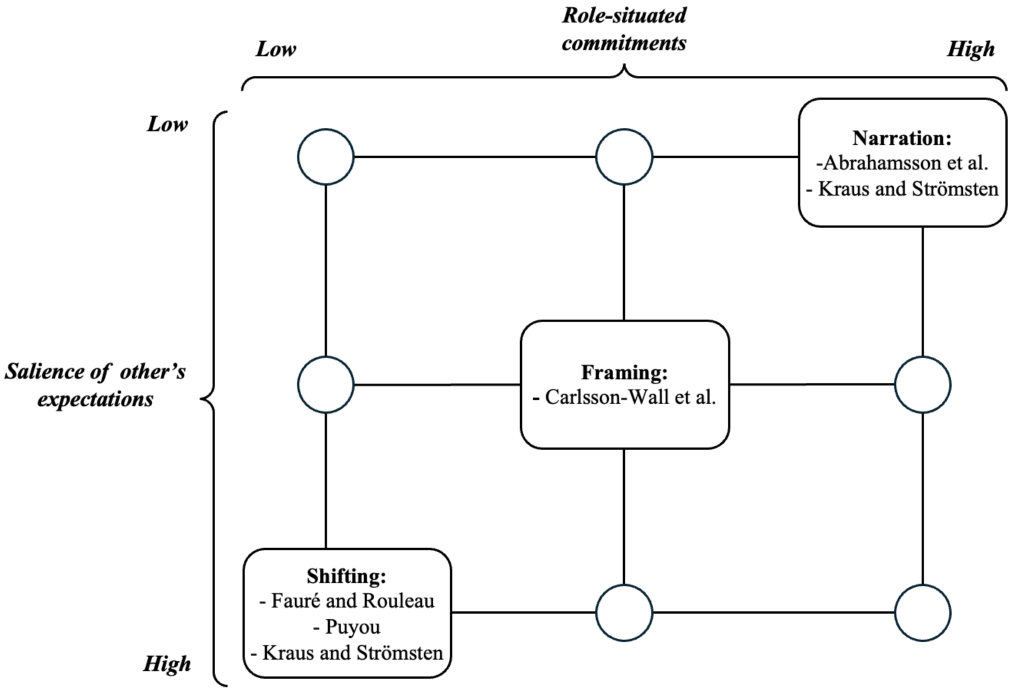

Figure 2. Accounting talk through the discursive model of sensemaking

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

3.1.1. Research Approach

A qualitative research methodology was adopted to explore how accounting talk bridges tension between formality and informality in micro and small enterprises. This approach was selected due to its strength in capturing the richness and complexity of social processes, which was essential for understanding the subtle dynamics of informal conversations, intuitive judgments, and the role of talk in decision-making. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, we aimed to explore how meanings are co-constructed through accounting talk, making a qualitative approach the most suitable (Bell, et al., 2019).

To guide the research process, we employed an abductive approach, as outlined by Dubois and Gadde (2002). This approach allowed for a continuous interplay between empirical data and theoretical frameworks, enabling an iterative movement back and forth between fieldwork, emerging insights, and relevant literature. Abductive reasoning was particularly valuable in this study, as our objective was not to confirm existing theories but to develop new understandings of how accounting talk functions in MSE contexts, settings that are underrepresented in accounting talk literature.

Our research journey exemplifies the flexibility and discovery-driven nature of the abductive process. Initially, the study was theoretically positioned to investigate power dynamics in accounting talk. Drawing on early literature reviews, we considered that power dynamics would be a central feature in how accounting conversations unfolded in MSEs. Accordingly, a theoretical lens grounded in power theory based on French & Raven (1959) was selected to guide early data collection and analysis.

However, as we began collecting empirical data through interviews and observations, it became evident that this lens did not adequately capture the richness of what was actually taking place. The conversations we observed were less about asserting control or authority, and more about navigating ambiguity, co-constructing meaning, and making sense of conflicting priorities. In response to this empirical insight, we re-evaluated our theoretical framing and shifted toward a sensemaking perspective (Cornelissen, 2012). This allowed us to better analyze how actors use accounting talk to interpret their environment, justify actions, and align around shared priorities.

This theoretical pivot illustrates the value of an abductive, iterative research design. As Eisenhardt (1989) emphasizes, theory development is most robust when researchers engage in a systematic comparison between emergent insights and empirical data, refining their conceptual frameworks in real time. In our case, the adoption of a sensemaking lens not only provided a better fit with the empirical material, but also opened up new avenues for theorizing the role of accounting talk in small-scale organizational settings.

3.1.2. The Case Study

A case study design was selected as the principal methodological approach, as it is well-suited for examining complex, context-dependent phenomena in real-life organizational settings (Yin, 2014). Given this study's aim to explore how accounting-related discourse bridges tension between formality and informality within micro and small enterprises, a case study enabled us to capture the nuanced, situated interactions through which such processes unfold.

At the beginning, we considered a multiple-case design and initiated contact with three distinct MSEs: a golf club, a cold brew manufacturer, and a real estate software-as-a-service (Saas) firm. All three organizations were selected through convenience sampling, based on the researchers' pre-existing professional relationships (Bell, et al., 2019). This sampling strategy was intentional, as gaining access to naturalistic conversational settings was critical to our research objective (see further discussions in 3.2 Data Collection). We anticipated that familiarity with the researchers would increase participants' comfort and likelihood of engaging authentically in informal dialogue, an essential condition for studying accounting talk in this situation.

Following preliminary discussions with representatives from each organization, the real estate SaaS company was identified as the most appropriate site for an in-depth, longitudinal investigation. Several factors informed this decision. Most notably, our initial access coincided with a strategically significant internal workshop focused on prioritizing sales leads, a topic that intersected directly with our theoretical interest in how accounting information is discussed, interpreted, and acted upon. In addition, the organization hosted weekly internal meetings that built upon the outcomes of this initial workshop. These recurring interactions provided both temporal depth and empirical richness, allowing us to observe the evolution of accounting talk over time.

The accessibility and openness of the organization further contributed to the suitability of this case. The company demonstrated a high level of transparency and granted us access to observe informal meetings and strategic conversations across hierarchical levels. These conditions allowed for immersive observation and facilitated a detailed understanding of how intuitive judgments and collective sensemaking were integrated through everyday verbal exchanges.

An additional consideration that ultimately led us to pursue a single case study was the scholarly endorsement of this design for studies seeking in-depth contextualization of social phenomena. As Dyer and Wilkins (1991) argue, single-case studies are particularly advantageous when the objective is to generate rich, context-sensitive insights rather than to test formal hypotheses or establish generalizability. This perspective is further supported by Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2014), who highlight the potential of single-case research to capture the complexity and embeddedness of organizational dynamics. While we recognize that the single-case approach necessarily limits the possibility of comparative analysis, one of the acknowledged trade-offs in qualitative research (Eisenhardt, 1989), we contend that the empirical depth and access afforded by this case more than compensated for the absence of cross-case comparison.

Initially, we contemplated including a large enterprise in our sample to explore potential differences in the nature and structure of accounting talk across organizational sizes. This consideration was informed by theoretical assumptions that smaller firms, due to their informality and flatter hierarchies, might rely more heavily on discursive, intuitive practices in place of formal accounting systems. However, following the initial workshop at the real estate SaaS firm, it became evident that the depth and richness of the data would be best leveraged through an in-depth, single-case analysis instead.

For the purposes of this study, the selected case organization, hereinafter referred to as *PropSoft*, is a founder-led (by the current COO) MSE operating within the real estate technology sector. At the time of data collection, the company employed approximately 15 individuals and offered a SaaS platform tailored to real estate companies. The organizational structure was notably flat, with close collaboration between sales staff and executive leadership. This arrangement enabled us to observe discursive interactions in strategic and operational domains, an ideal setting for examining how accounting talk serves to mediate accounting information and intuitive managerial judgments.

3.2. Data Collection

In alignment with our abductive research approach, the data collection process was designed to iteratively develop empirical and theoretical insights. Our objective was to capture accounting talk as it naturally emerged in organizational settings, and to understand how accounting-related discourse mediated intuitive decision-making and the use of structured numerical tools. The data collection consisted of three interrelated phases: (1) a naturalistic observation of an extended strategic workshop, (2) participation in a series of recurring follow-up meetings, and (3) semi-structured interviews with key organizational actors (see Appendix A for structure).

3.2.1. Phase 1: Naturalistic Observation

The primary entry point into the organization was a full-day digital workshop conducted via Microsoft Teams, which brought together the COO, CEO, and members of the sales team. The stated objective of the session was to collaboratively explore how the company should prioritize its client leads in order to maximize long-term value. The workshop lasted approximately nine hours and served as a naturalistic site for observing informal accounting talk. Following the principles of non-interventionist observation, the researchers introduced themselves at the beginning of the call but did not engage in the conversation. This approach allowed for the generation of empirical data in an unstructured and non-reactive setting, minimizing the researchers' influence on participant behavior (Silverman, 2013).

During the workshop, a focal point of discussion emerged around a lead evaluation tool developed by the COO, an Excel-based scoring matrix intended to guide sales prioritization. This tool, referred to hereafter as the Prioritization Scoring Framework (PSF), included both quantitative and qualitative evaluation criteria. The PSF quickly became a central object of debate and negotiation during the workshop, raising questions around the role of numbers, intuition, and the legitimacy of scoring systems. This initial conversation not only laid the foundation for the study but also shaped the subsequent data collection, which was designed to trace how the PSF was received, interpreted, and operationalized over time.

3.2.2. Phase 2: Weekly Follow-up Meetings

Following the initial workshop, we were granted access to attend the company's weekly sales coordination meetings, held every Monday via Microsoft Teams. These meetings served as a recurring forum for team members to discuss ongoing client engagements and revisit the lead prioritization process. Again, the researchers remained passive participants, attending without contributing, and adopted an observational stance similar to that employed in the workshop. The use of digital observation allowed us to unobtrusively monitor the development of accounting talk surrounding the PSF in its natural context over time.

In total, the authors attended six weekly meetings. Detailed notes were taken during each session, with particular attention given to how the PSF was referenced, reinterpreted, or resisted in different conversational episodes. This longitudinal data collection enabled us to map the discursive evolution of the PSF and to identify how accounting concepts were negotiated across different actors and over time.

3.2.3. Phase 3: Semi-Structured Interviews

To complement our observational data and gain deeper insights into individual sensemaking processes, we also conducted semi-structured interviews (Silverman, 2013). These interviews were designed to explore participants' experiences with the PSF and their broader attitudes toward the use of accounting information in decision-making. In keeping with an abductive logic, the interview guide was refined iteratively, informed by emerging patterns observed in the workshop and weekly meetings. Interviews were conducted over phone and, similar to the weekly follow-up meeting, notes were taken during each session. At the start of each interview, we reiterated the study's objectives and assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity.

The first interview was conducted with the COO after the workshop and two Monday meetings, focusing on the motivations behind the development of the PSF, its intended purpose, and the rationale for incorporating specific evaluation criteria, see interview guide in Appendix B for the structure. This conversation offered valuable background on the system's design logic and how it reflected the COO’s managerial intuitions. A subsequent interview after five Monday meetings was also carried out with one member of the sales team, aimed at capturing how they interpreted the PSF, whether and how they used it in practice, and their views on its relevance and usability, see interview guide in Appendix C for the structure.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis process was conducted iteratively, allowing empirical insights and theoretical framing to mutually inform one another throughout the study. The analysis involved a multi-step procedure that combined thematic analysis with techniques from conversation analysis (CA), tailored to the specific nature of the material and the overarching aim of studying accounting talk.

3.3.1. Data Management

Given the large volume and heterogeneous nature of the collected data, including a full-day workshop, six weekly meetings, and two semi-structured interviews, a structured approach to managing the empirical material was essential. Not all observed interactions were fully transcribed. Instead, we adopted a selective transcription strategy, focusing on episodes directly relevant to our research objective. Segments unrelated to accounting, such as informal social conversations or administrative logistics, were excluded from transcription to maintain analytical clarity. Audio recordings were reviewed in full, and timestamps were logged to facilitate retrieval and thematic categorization.

Transcripts were produced manually and included content and, where relevant, notes on tone, emphasis, or interruptions to retain paralinguistic cues that may affect interpretation (Baker et al., 2022). This was particularly relevant for observed meetings, where tone or delivery often signaled implicit meaning or emotional engagement with accounting-related topics. Where applicable, brief comments or annotations were included in the margins to flag potential analytical leads.

3.3.2. Thematic Coding

Following initial familiarization with the material, we employed thematic analysis as the primary analytical framework (Silverman, 2013). First-order open coding was conducted independently by both researchers on the transcripts of the strategic workshop and initial interviews. This stage involved identifying repeated patterns of language, references to the PSF or metrics, and expressions of intuitive or conflicting reasoning. Codes were initially generated without reference to a pre-existing coding scheme, in order to remain open to emergent themes. These initial codes were then grouped into broader thematic clusters, allowing us to move toward second-order analysis focused on processes such as the operationalization of the PSF, the framing of value, and the use of accounting language in decision-making.

3.3.3. Temporal Mapping

To capture how accounting talk evolved over time, we observed relevant discussions related to the PSF across the six weekly meetings. Meeting notes and transcriptions were synchronized with timestamps and themes, enabling us to trace how specific concepts were discussed. This was done to identify turning points, repetition, or shifts in terminology, and helped connect observations from different data sources into a coherent developmental sequence. It also supported the identification of discursive patterns over time, such as increasing alignment, recurring misunderstandings, or rhetorical strategies employed by key participants.

3.3.4. Conversation Analysis Techniques

While full CA notation was not adopted, we drew on methodological insights from conversation analysis to examine the structure and function of interactions around accounting topics (Baker et al., 2022). We focused on specific conversational features such as interruptions, pauses, laughter, repetition, and turn-taking, particularly in instances where the PSF was debated, questioned, or informally justified. By incorporating CA-inspired techniques, we aimed to retain sensitivity to the interactional nature of accounting talk, not merely analyzing what was said, but also how it was said, and in what context. This was particularly useful for capturing subtle organizational dynamics and interpretive processes, especially in the strategic workshop and follow-up meetings.

3.4. Research Quality

3.4.1. Authenticity and Plausibility

To ensure the methodological rigor of this study, we adopted established quality criteria for interpretive qualitative research, as proposed by Lukka and Modell (2010). In contrast to the positivist notions of reliability, validity, and generalizability, interpretive studies are better evaluated through the concepts of authenticity and plausibility. These criteria are particularly suited to studies that aim to explore complex, socially embedded phenomena, where the goal is not to test causal relationships but to produce contextually grounded, meaningful interpretations.

Authenticity refers to the extent to which the empirical material captures the multiplicity of perspectives present in the field, and reflects the lived experience of organizational actors. In this study, we sought to establish authenticity by employing a multi-method data collection strategy that allowed for access to real-time interactions in their natural setting. Our entry point, the nine-hour workshop involving key decision-makers and sales personnel, provided a rich, unfiltered view of internal discussions and debates around the PSF. Crucially, the researchers remained non-participant observers throughout, which minimized reactivity and preserved the spontaneity of the discourse. To further increase authenticity, we conducted semi-structured interviews, thereby incorporating multiple organizational viewpoints. The interviews were designed to elicit individual interpretations of the PSF and own reflections.

Plausibility, on the other hand, relates to the credibility and reasonableness of the interpretations derived from the empirical material. This was addressed through a structured thematic analysis, as outlined in Section 3.3.2 Thematic coding. This process was accompanied by regular cross-checking between the researchers to enhance interpretive coherence and mitigate individual bias. Selective transcription and re-listening to audio recordings allowed us to preserve interactional subtleties, such as tone, hesitation, and emphasis, which enriched the plausibility of our interpretations.

Despite these efforts, the study is not without limitations. As our access was facilitated by pre-existing relationships (one of the researchers had done an internship) with the organization, there is a potential risk that participants may have self-selected or behaved in ways that would not occur otherwise. However, our extended presence in multiple meetings and our deliberate non-interventionist stance likely mitigated these effects, as participants quickly resumed natural patterns of communication. Another limitation concerns the temporal scope of the study. Since data collection began with the strategic workshop on lead prioritization, we do not have direct access to how accounting talk or lead evaluation was conducted prior to the introduction of the PSF. This constrains our ability to compare pre- and post-framework discourse and to fully contextualize shifts in communicative or evaluative practices. Nevertheless, by analyzing the longitudinal development of discussions following the workshop and triangulating observational data with retrospective reflections gathered in interviews, we believe the study provides credible and insightful representations of how accounting talk operated within the studied period.

3.4.2. Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was carefully considered throughout the design and execution of this study, in accordance with established ethical guidelines for qualitative research (Bell et al., 2019). Particular attention was given to issues of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the minimization of potential harm to participants. Prior to all data collection activities, including workshop observation, participation in weekly meetings, and individual interviews, participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study. They were explicitly told that the research would form part of a master's thesis and that all information collected would be anonymized and used solely for academic purposes. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. In line with the General Data Protection Regulation, participants were assured that no identifying details would be disclosed and that they could withdraw their participation at any point without consequence.

Interviews were recorded with explicit consent and transcribed for analytical purposes. All data was stored securely and treated in accordance with university ethical protocols. Pseudonyms and general descriptors (e.g., "COO" and "salesperson") were used to preserve participant anonymity in the presentation of findings. Given that the topic of discussion was not of a personally sensitive nature, the risk of psychological or emotional harm was assessed to be minimal. Nevertheless, care was taken to phrase interview questions in an open and non-leading manner, and participants were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing.

4. Empirical Analysis

4.1.1. Full-day Workshop

PropSoft had scheduled a workshop day that we were able to participate in. The workshop was held at their office where the COO and CEO had planned the day while the CFO and the four sales representatives partook. The meeting was termed “sales day”, and most of the day consisted of discussing how to prioritize lead generation and lead execution and hence how to allocate the time and resources of PropSoft most effectively. As the COO had explained:

“Sometimes, low priority things take up more time than high priority things. I don’t want that someone says ‘I’ve been in contact with The Solna Hot Dog Stand on Vasagatan and then four hours is allocated to that customer but they only bring in 200kr per year”

The COO opens the meeting by presenting a possible working method for how to prioritize the leads and says *“This is one way that could work, but it’s not the truth. The idea is to find a good approach. There are plenty of ways”*.

He shares his screen and shows an Excel file. *“One way of doing it”* he says again while the common look on everyone’s faces hints to the fact that no one had seen the excel file before. The COO presents the Excel file and shows that it consists of four columns with scores and one last column that sums the total scores. He quickly goes through the columns and explains what they stand for:

Order value: *“How much money are we actually talking about?”*
PR value: *“Marketing value for us”*
Realisation value: *“How close is the customer to doing something with us, percentage-wise to deal”*
ROI value: *“The benefit the customer gets from us”*

The COO summarizes the system by showing that if a customer scores well in all categories, they should be prioritized:

“If I have a customer who brings in a lot of money, is great for marketing, is close to doing something with us, and gains a lot from us, then that’s a high-priority customer. This is how I evaluate customers. I think about this in my head without having exact numbers. It is possible

to systematize how gut feeling works, and hence it becomes easier for others to understand. When I made this system I basically just reverse-engineered my gut feeling into numbers!"

He further explains that he assigns a score for each column for every customer and gives examples of what high and low scores might mean:

High score on Order value: *"Our business would pivot tomorrow if we land this customer - StockholmProp AB for example"*
Low score on Order value: *"Barely profitable customer"*
Low vs. High score on PR value: "*Are we talking about Lasse's hot dog stand in Motala or are we talking about BigBrand, the governmental company?"*
Low vs. High score on Realisation value: *"Talked to 'Håkan' in the basement, who cares, right? Or are they recurring customers like LargeProp AB?"*
Low ROI value score: *"Do they make less than 50% from us?"*

The CEO shifts in his seat when he hears the COO talk about customers with low ROI value and asks for a concrete example: *"Is a low ROI value customer for example new residential developments?".*

The COO replies:

"Yes for example, but also SmallBuilder AB, he is a builder in Dalarna. He has a concept where he's only interested in land plots. He doesn't care about anything else, so he doesn't benefit much from us, so he is probably below 50%"

The CEO seems impressed with the COO and the system he has presented and says:

"This becomes a simple way to get a grasp on this (customer prioritization) mentally"

COO excitingly responds:

"Exactly! I've taken it from my head and tried to translate it into numbers. This is my way, but what do you all think about having a method like this?"

The conversation around the table in the dimly lit office somewhere in Kungsholmen quickly shifts to discussing the system, its value, and potential for integration. Salesperson 1 expresses doubt about the suggested system, pointing out they already use a CRM system:

“Now we’re working in Excel, but we already use Pipedrive. How do we integrate this into Pipedrive?”

The CEO suggests using the COO’s system as a way to prioritize which customers to focus on in the existing CRM system:

“You can do this exercise on 20 leads to figure out which 5 should be prioritized”.

Salesperson 1 remains skeptical, saying there is no time for such an analysis:

“Pipedrive is supposed to contain condensed information. Sure, one can do the exercise individually, but we won’t have time, none of us salespeople have time”.

The COO tries to address the objections, saying the system is not meant to create extra work, but rather to focus operations and spend less time and responses on low value customers:

“Yeah, if the [customer] scores under 10 [total score], then it’s not someone I typically work with”.

Salesperson 1 listens but argues that no system is needed, since he already makes a prioritization himself:

“Yeah, but that’s how it’s always been!”

The COO, slightly frustrated with salesperson 1, addresses the group now:

“Can we imagine working like this?”

Salesperson 2 realises that the COO is now looking straight at him and comments, in line with salesperson 1, that some parts of the suggested system is part of every day operations:

“We already understand things like revenue and PR value in our heads. It’s done instinctively, often it’s obvious that LargeProp AB is better than Nisses Bygg, nine times out of ten”.

“*Sure, but if LargeProp AB never becomes a client and Nisses Bygg is at the door and ready, then Nisses Bygg should be the priority”* the COO answers quickly, showing that he believes the current prioritization by the sales team is neither adequate nor well-balanced across the four aspects he had presented. He now poses a somewhat leading question:

"Is there any benefit in formalizing it [how they prioritize], then?"

The CEO reflects on the COO's question of the value in formalizing the prioritization system:

"It could be good to put this down on paper so we can hear how others reason. If salesperson 4's customers all score 25 points, that might be odd. Newly built residential properties are less interesting than older commercial buildings in the city, those can never be rated a 5, and in terms of Order value, construction companies go down. BigConstruction AB can never be a 25 total point".

The COO appreciates that the system and its vocabulary is starting to be used:

"Exactly, and this is interesting because each individual score can have different weights. Karlsson's Bygg in Motala, sure, it's not a high Order value, but if realization is a 5, that can compensate. But if it's a 1 in both Order value and realisation, then he's out. He has no business with us. But do we see any value in the company having a standardized template?"

The CEO looks around the room and when he sees the frowns on the faces of the salespeople he says:

"I think there's a big risk that such a template won't be followed. If we add another system, it won't hold, but maybe it doesn't have to. Maybe it's just worth doing the exercise occasionally?"

The COO lights up *"Aha! You're thinking of it as a dialogue tool?"*

The skeptical salesperson 1, who is still not convinced, continues his critique by saying that the system will only add red tape. He further argues that every person should do their own analysis and then only put the most interesting leads in the CRM system:

"We shouldn't build bureaucracy, it should be condensed and goal-oriented. I think the system you showed is good, but then it should be per person. What we then enter into Pipedrive must have density".

The COO frowns at the idea of not logging all customers in the system:

"Everything should ideally go into Pipedrive. But we don't have to talk about the ones with too low a score".

He continues by expressing that one of the underlying values of having a system is that prioritization can then be decentralized:

"But do we think it's a useful exercise to do a few times to get into the mindset? How can we better understand each other? We often talk about prioritization at the office, and people run to me to discuss it. Salesperson 2 is usually the one getting handed a prio list, but now at least you know what I base it on"

The COO now turns to the CFO who has been quietly observing the conversations up until this point: *"What value do you see in a tool like this?"*

The CFO, who seems slightly surprised that he got a direct question, quickly shifts his weight from the back to the front of his chair and says:

"Yes, this is mainly important for new customers, to understand each other and the prioritization logic. If salesperson 4 says this customer is worth chasing, but he's rated them ones and twos, then it's easier to question it by saying 'What were you thinking?' And vice versa if someone gave a customer all fives, but we haven't spoken to them in a while, I can follow up and ask if it's worth revisiting".

The skeptical salesperson 1 reacts to the CFO's view of the system, as a means of monitoring and questioning the sales team, by once again attempting to discredit it. This time, the criticism focuses on a flaw in the scoring method:

"I don't think we can be assigning fives and threes. At the end of the day, it's about relationships, I find it hard to assign scores to that"

The COO, who is starting to show slight hints of irritability, decides to give an example of how to score a customer to prove that the system works and says:

"*Okay, then I'll show how we can score. Let's take NorthMunicipality. I know they're close to your heart. Look here. Order value? Pretty low, right? [They are] barely profitable. But here comes the interesting part! PR value, what do you say?"*

Salesperson 1: *"Yes, that's high"*

COO: *"Realisation?"*

Salesperson 1: *"Yes, they're close"*

COO: *"And ROI value? Do they benefit from us?"*

Salesperson 1: *"Yes"*

COO: *"A lot?"*

Salesperson 1: *"Yes"*

COO: *"So, could we say a 4 then?"*

The COO looks at the sheet, types in some numbers, and then looks back at salesperson 1 with a satisfied expression:

"And here I can clearly say that there's value in working with NorthMunicipality! It's just that their Order value score is low"

The sceptical salesperson 1 nods to the fact that it did indeed work to score one of his own customers using the system, yet he makes one more try in criticizing the system by arguing that this type of formal system does not belong in a salesperson's role:

"But we're not supposed to be engineers assigning grades left and right"

The CEO, who also is starting to show signs of irritation, steps in. He does not care if the system is followed strictly but emphasizes that even if a customer has a high total score, balance between criteria is still needed:

"If you can do this analysis without filling anything out, that's fine. But if we say that 15 points is the threshold to prioritize a customer, and you only go after 15-pointers with an Order value of 1, that's also a problem"

Salesperson 1 reacts, noting the CEO's aversion to low Order value clients. Earlier, Salesperson 1 had said he preferred to go after high PR value clients with lower Order value. He seems worried that the clients he is focusing on are valued low with this system and argues that strategic value is also important and not just Order value: *"But how do we grade the strategic value then?*

The COO reiterates that what salesperson 1 is talking about is exactly what PR value stands for. He further adds:

"These scores aren't absolute truths, but even with a system like this, it shows that NorthMunicipality, despite low Order value, can still be of interest".

The salesperson 1 mutters irritably.

The COO, clearly done trying to be diplomatic, decides to explain to the group that the main goal with the system is to make sure everyone thinks through the resource- and time allocation properly. The COO had expressed his frustration with salesperson 1 in a subsequent interview where he said that he (salesperson 1) "*stands for something that becomes too unstructured for a company. I mean, you can't just go with gut feeling and never be able to account for how you prioritize things"*. He now addresses the group in a more direct and straightforward manner:

"The point is, let's say our CFO is counting every penny and we have 10,000 SEK left for one final client trip. We must choose, should I go to LargeProperty AB or should salesperson 1 go to Skellefteå? Then the score value might show we need cash quickly and Order value trumps PR value. But if we're going to Almedalen, maybe PR value should trump Order value. This is exactly the kind of dialogue I want to encourage!"

The CEO returns to his earlier point about a balanced portfolio of clients. He seems worried, on the basis of salesperson 1's clear focus on PR-value clients, that Order value is not prioritized:

"Everyone also needs their own client portfolio with at least some 20+ scorers. You can't just have PR value. The CFO and I won't be happy then".

The COO tires to sum it up by saying:

"So, should we distribute this tool to everyone so they can try scoring their own clients?"

The skeptical salesperson 1 now also decided to stop being diplomatic and says that he will not use the system: *"No, you don't need to hand this out. Am I supposed to sit and assign a two and then a five?"*

The CEO seems to want to move forward with the day and says: *"Okay, we get that you're not going to do it, that's fine. We'll send it to those who want to try it"*.

COO tries to cool the tension and says: *"This has just helped me explain how I view a client, and it might be a useful way for others to explain how they see a client. If we're talking about a customer, this tool might be very useful. Then we do the scores together, and it might spark a discussion"*.

The sceptical Salesperson 1 shows the need to clarify his negativity and says *"There's nothing wrong with structure, but at the end of the day, it's about action in the real world"*.

The COO answers: *"Absolutely, we're all different. I don't use this system myself. I go with gut feeling, but apparently, my gut feeling can be turned into numbers!"*

Salesperson 1 once again points to the tension at hand and shows that the understands that there must be structure yet he also voices concerns that it might lead to too much formality:

"*At the end of the day, we should be able to show investors that there's structure, but we shouldn't create bureaucracy"*.

The COO had communicated in an interview with the researchers that he indeed was aware of the tension that would arise if he demanded the adherence to a formal system:

"I try to work with indoctrination, if you think of this from a manipulation perspective, if you want people to start getting used to a system that might be implemented, well then it's good to show the system a couple of times before. We are in a phase now where it would never have worked for me to demand compliance to a system. That would have created too much bureaucracy. If you want to repaint a wall at the office, start by painting a corner of the wall and let people get used to it".

The COO acknowledges the salesperson 1's opinion by reiterating the CEO's note that the system is not mandatory: *"Some people need more structure and others less. Salesperson 2 might like a bit more structure while you need less"*.

The CEO, who thinks it is still important that the underlying value of the system is understood, explains that it could make future sales meetings more insightful:

"When we have sales meetings, and you say that you will have meetings with Jocke's Bygg, Svensson Groundservice, and Jonny's Plumbing, then maybe it feels like you've got no plan. It's helpful to understand why you're meeting them and how much time you spend. If we carry this ranking system with us mentally, I think we'll get far".

4.1.2. Monday Meetings

Each Monday, the team holds a meeting to review their activities from the previous week and plan for the upcoming one. We observed these meetings for several weeks after the initial full-day workshop was conducted. The COO had expressed that:

"The system is already in use, people are talking in terms of 'this customer does not bring in so much money but the PR-value is good'. And that is proof that the idea has already landed. But it's all about being able to talk about a customer in terms that everyone understands. Now we at least have something we can talk about".

Similarly, a salesperson noted that *"We use the system, but we don't say 'now we're going to use the system' instead, we indirectly say things like 'how big is the customer?', 'It has really good PR value', 'they would benefit a lot from us'. That's how we discuss things now, even though we're not filling out a document"*. The salesperson further elaborated on why the system was only in place informally and argued that it has to do with the size of the organization:

"Naturally, the bigger you get, the more formal things become. We've gone from being a garage startup to now being in the scale-up phase. And for a while, we were also quite few people, so everything could be handled informally".

Indeed, during the observation of the Monday meetings we saw that the concepts of Order value, PR value, Realization value, and ROI value were being used, either directly or indirectly, to justify decisions about time allocation (resource allocation). While the specific terminology was not always used, the underlying reasoning aligns with the COO's statement that the system had already begun to be implemented. What further became evident was how the concepts of Order value, PR value, Realization value, and ROI value spurred discussions about how to allocate time and resources. Further, when one of the four aspects was not sufficiently high to justify the time spent on one customer, discussions could arise on how to potentially increase the value of that specific metric in order to justify the time allocation. Below is a summary of the observations during the Monday meetings:

The CEO opens the meeting by explaining to everyone and to us as researchers the purpose of the meeting

"This meeting will be about our hottest leads and what is on top of the agenda"

He hands over the word to salesperson 3 by asking if he wants to start by telling the group about how he is planning the week. Salesperson 3, explains that he will focus on LargeMunicipality and work with BigCameraBrand AB to scan parts of the municipality. He uses the size of the municipality and the potential to create good PR for future customers as to why this is important:

"I will focus on LargeMunicipality and this will give us a good reference case when we present for future customers"

The CEO seems to understand the value with this customer as predominantly a PR-value related and communicates that the work they do with LargeMunicipality must then be filmed and photographed so that PR material is generated from that work:

"Then we must make sure that we also film when we scan the city so we can actually make good PR from it"

The CEO however points out, just like he had done during the workshop day, that the balance between PR and Order value must be aligned so that not just PR value is all they get out from working with this customer:

"I just want to mention it so you can keep it in mind, but we must be laser focused on keeping our margins even when we do these pilot cases. Everything cannot be included, we cannot afford to be too accommodating"

Salesperson 3 shows that he remembers this point from the workshop day and says *"yes, we must follow the economic aspect as well"*. He answers the CEO by telling him that it is good that he brings up the balance aspect between Order value and PR value again and that *"the point is taken"*.

The CEO hands over the word to salesperson 4 who starts by going through what he had recently been up to. He uses both the Realization value aspect (closeness to making a deal) and the strength of the brand of the customer to argue for the time spent with that particular customer. He further points out that his contact person was not *“Håkan in the basement”* but one of the founders:

“I had a really good meeting with BigBrand AB last friday, with one of the founders, he gave us a promise that if we want to work with them we can do that, so we could sign a letter of intent with them so we can publish that since BigBrand AB is a rather strong brand in Sweden”

Salesperson 4 further describes a second meeting he has had with another potential customer and primarily argues that this customer is worth pursuing since they are a large player, which connects to the Order value aspect of prioritization:

“I had a meeting with WellKnownProperty AB who owns StockholmCentrum, and they want to scan all of StockholmCentrum, so it would be really good to get our system into that large property of 107 thousand square meters”

He continues by bringing up yet another customer he has pursued and argues that that customer is also high priority since he can say with *“98% certainty that we will be able to scan and deliver a model to them”*, using the high likelihood of realization as to why the customer is of high prioritization.

The CEO seems impressed with salesperson 4 and with a mix of delightfulness and excitement he says *“this is really good!”*

Salesperson 2 now seems eager to tell the group about what he has been working on and brings up a windmill customer he has been working with. He proudly names BigName1 and BigName2 as two of the customers he had talked to. He then however turns to saying that the contact person he has been talking to *“wants to do this”* but it is hard to *“show internally”* the benefit clearly. The high PR value yet lower ROI value for the customer is something that the CEO seems to be aware of when it comes to the windmill companies:

“Yes, I think we all know that these companies are interested but we must find ways of spicing up the offer a bit”

Salesperson 2 agrees, emphasizing the need to find ways to better demonstrate the value. It becomes apparent that the group is now focused on the low ROI value as the key challenge, and a discussion is started aimed at brainstorming ideas to enhance the ROI value proposition for the windmill companies. One of the other salespeople suggests that perhaps these companies are working with specific systems that PropSoft could integrate with, thereby boosting the value proposition. Salesperson 2 points out that there is a distinction between companies involved in building new windmills and those focused solely on managing existing ones. This leads to a broader conversation about how these companies truly operate. One salesperson mentions having recently watched a documentary about windmills, contributing additional insights to the discussion. The CEO, somewhat concerned that the time invested in these customers may not yield sufficient returns, then adds:

"I believe that the next step in this sales process will be to focus more on the ongoing management of these windmills and not just the preparation phase. Now it's too easy for them to bring us in and then end the subscription after only one month when they have received all of the scans".

The group now seems to agree that a shift in focus to another part of the windmill companies' business is what will drive higher perceived ROI value and hence the windmill companies are still worth pursuing.

Salesperson 4 speaks up again, mentioning that he has a meeting scheduled next week with LargeSki AB, who *"were interested in scanning a lot of properties"*. He then brings up a recent conversation with a potential customer and points out their excitement for PropSoft's platform highlighting the likelihood of them becoming customers: *"I spoke with a company that's looking for a platform to visualize sensors and leaks, and they got really excited when I showed them our product".*

The CEO agrees that LargeSki AB is a valuable target customer because of their size and potential Order value. He also expresses interest in the second company, noting their apparent enthusiasm for the product. He now decides to tell the group about his own week:

"My own week is sales focused. We're trying to close a pilot project, it's in Västerås, a huge building, about 40,000 square meters, which we've already scanned. They have tons of buildings, millions of square meters, even internationally".

The CEO frames the interest in this particular customer in terms of their potential for generating a high order value. In line with how they had talked during the initial workshop day, size of the customer had become synonymous with the size of the potential Order value.

Salesperson 2 now jumps in with a comment about a potential client they could reach out to. He explains that he walked past a property and noticed that they seem to be exploring unused building rights. He argues that they should contact them and pitch their scanning service and tools, given the high value PropSoft could bring:

“I walked past that BigBank building, they are in need of understanding if they can build two extra floors on the building, and our scanning can help with that”

The CEO lights up, clearly excited about the potential of selling to that particular customer, given the high ROI value for the customer and potentially short time to close the deal since the customer is in the middle of a process:

“Very good point” he says. *“Follow up on that lead next time you’re in the office”* he adds, confirming that Salesperson 3 is right to prioritize this opportunity.

Salesperson 4 mentions that he has seen a public procurement opportunity open and suggests they should submit a proposal. He argues that what the client is asking for is exactly what PropSoft can deliver, making it worth pursuing:

“The City of Helsingborg has put out a request for drone mapping, and they want the results to be presented in a web-based platform. Their specifications fit us perfectly, it was a checkmark on every point. I’m thinking I’ll draft a response to the tender on our behalf”.

He reinforces his point by highlighting that the ROI value for the client would be high, making it a strong case for submitting a proposal.

The CEO responds with a somewhat mixed expression to the group. He mentions that he has also seen the tender that Salesperson 4 brought up. However, since the procurement involves both scanning the property and delivering the scanned data in a platform, he expresses concern that submitting a bid directly from PropSoft could damage their relationships with existing scanning partners, something that could ultimately harm the company’s brand. He further adds that the chances of winning such tenders are typically low and that it may not be worth the companies time and resources:

"There's so much work involved in these kinds of tenders, and to be honest, we don't really have the time, especially considering how slim the odds are of actually winning".

The CEO supports his argument for why they should not spend time on the tender with both the potential PR downside and the low Realization value. The discussion continues, and the group eventually agrees on a workaround: If they reach out to a scanning company and ask them to submit the tender response using PropSoft as the platform, they would save significant time since the scanning company would handle most of the writing. In that scenario, they all agree it is worth moving forward with the application.

The CEO now shifts the focus and steers the discussion toward how they should prioritize their time between reaching out to companies that manufacture and supply property sensors for potential partnerships, and the time spent actually selling their services to end customers; the property owners. He directs the question to the COO, who responds:

"To be honest, we've already spent too much time reaching out to sensor companies. It's better to go deeper with the contacts we already have than to make sure our software integrates with ten different humidity sensors. That gets pretty shallow. But if we can bring in sensors for elevators, humidity, and inspections, now that's compelling".

The COO expresses that the time salespeople spend on contacting sensor companies should be evaluated in terms of the ROI value it brings to the end customer. He emphasizes that a broader sensor portfolio hence creates significantly more value for the client.

Salesperson 3 steps in to defend why he believes it is valuable to continue reaching out to sensor companies. He highlights the marketing and PR value of building strong relationships with these sensor companies:

"When it comes to these sensor companies, it's essentially their customer base we've also identified, so it's like hitting two birds with one stone".

The CEO agrees with salesperson 3's argumentation and supports the idea of maintaining contact with sensor companies, arguing that it also serves as effective marketing toward end clients. Since sensor companies already have existing relationships with many property owners, the same companies PropSoft is targeting, it creates natural inroads:

"I think you're onto something here. We should continue meeting with these companies, partly because it's always good marketing to meet with them. The more people who know we exist, the better, especially since they often work directly with our end customers".

The CEO sees the time investment primarily as part of a broader marketing strategy. He emphasizes the importance of *"always wearing the sales hat"* when meeting these companies, underscoring the aim to get as much marketing out of each interaction as possible since that is the end goal.

Salesperson 3 agrees with the CEO's reasoning and mentions there is already evidence it works, they have landed a client thanks to their collaboration with a sensor company.

The COO steps back into the discussion to clarify that he is not against engaging with sensor companies, but stresses that how the time is spent matters:

"I'd rather see you go deeper with one company than spread time across five more sensor companies".

He reiterates his earlier point that breadth in sensor types is more valuable to the end customer than breadth in sensor providers. The group agrees that they should continue investing time in sensor company relationships, but always with the end customer's ROI value as the guiding principle. Before the meeting ends the floor shifts to Salesperson 1:

"I'm working with NorthMunicipality, which is opening the doors to several property companies for us, I have no reason to believe they won't come on board".

He hence argues in terms of the high PR value of the Municipality and the high Realization value. He continues by says that he had also been in contact with LargeManufacturer AB, a company he believes has potential to become a client:

"They're interested in reducing rental costs using PropSoft. Everything physical that sits on the balance sheet, like real estate, needs to be managed. And if they can do that in a smarter way, why wouldn't they want to?"

Salesperson 1 argues that LargeManufacturer AB is worth approaching, as the potential ROI value for them is significant.

The CEO agrees with the reasoning and responds:

"That's exciting - follow it up!"

4.1.3. Summary of the Empirical Case Study

The findings indicate that economic considerations, referred to as Order value, play a significant role in the selection of which customers to contact and engage with. References to property size such as *"107 thousand square meters" and "millions of square meters"* suggest that the potential scale of a customer's portfolio is a factor in prioritization. Statements like *"a huge building, about 40,000 square meters"* and *"I have also booked a meeting with LargSki AB because they seemed very interested in scanning a lot of properties"* show that customer outreach is linked to perceived economic potential. Additionally, the mention of being *"laser focused on keeping our margins"* indicates that maintaining profitability is a relevant consideration in these decisions. Likewise, at other times, the salespeople used the PR value to argue for the resource allocation (time spent pursuing a customer). The statement *"this will give us a good reference case when we present for future customers"* indicates that the potential to use a customer as a case study is part of the reasoning behind engaging with them. Similarly, the quote *"I'm working with LargeMunicipality, which is opening the doors to several property companies for us"* suggests that collaboration with certain customers is also valued for its ability to create further business opportunities through increased visibility and credibility. There were also instances where the salespeople tailored their arguments for time- and resource allocation around what had been referred to as *"Realization Value"* during the initial workshop. Statements such as *"I would say with 98% certainty that we will be able to scan and deliver a model to them"* and *"he gave us a promise that if we want to work with them we can do that"* indicate that the team argues on the basis of how close a customer is to committing. Similarly, phrases like *"I have no reason to believe they won't come on board"* and *"they got really excited when I showed them our platform"* reflect a focus on customer readiness and the probability of successful implementation when prioritizing engagement efforts.

Furthermore, the perceived ROI value for the customer was also used to argue for the time allocated to some customers. The statement *"they are in need of understanding if they can build two extra floors on the building, and our scanning can help with that"* suggests that the salespeople are targeting opportunities where their service can directly contribute to financial gain or cost-saving. Similarly, *"They're interested in reducing rental costs using PropSoft"* reflects a ROI-driven approach, aiming to provide value by addressing cost-related challenges. The comment *"everything that is physical and on the balance sheet needs to be managed and if there's a better way to do it, why wouldn't they?"* further highlights the focus on offering solutions that improve financial outcomes, indicating an alignment with the aspect of ROI value. Some of the quotes from the findings are displayed in the Table 1 below and organized in accordance with the specific aspect of the PSF that it draws upon:

	Order value	**PR value**	**Realization value**	**ROI value**
Observation	*"we must be laser focused on keeping our* ***margins****"* *"I have also booked a meeting with LargeSki AB because they seemed very interested in* ***scanning a lot of properties****"* *"it would be really good to get our system into that* ***large property of 107 thousand square meters****"* *"a* ***huge building****, about* ***40,000*** *square meters"* *"They have tons of buildings,* ***millions of square meters****, even internationally"*	*"this will give us a good* ***reference case*** *when we present for future customers"* *"I'm working with NorthMunicipality, which is* ***opening the doors*** *to several property companies for us"* *"When it comes to these sensor companies, it's essentially* ***their customer base*** *we've also identified"* *"I had a really good meeting with BigBrand AB [that] is a* ***rather strong brand in Sweden****"*	*"I would say with* ***98% certainty*** *that we will be able to scan and deliver a model to them"* *"He gave us a* ***promise*** *that if we want to work with them we can do that"* *"I have* ***no reason to believe they won't come on board****"* *"I spoke with a company that's looking for a platform to visualize meters and leaks, and* ***they got really excited*** *when I showed them our platform"*	*"****they are in need*** *of understanding if they can build two extra floors on the building, and* ***our scanning can help with that****"* *"They're interested in* ***reducing rental costs*** *using PropSoft"* *"Everything physical that sits on the balance sheet, like real estate, needs to be managed. And if they can* ***do that in a smarter way, why wouldn't they want to****?"* *"Their specifications* ***fit us perfectly****, it was a* ***checkmark on every point****"*

Table 1. Mapping of PSF usage

5. Discussion

5.1. The Co-creation of a Language

Our case study focuses on how accounting talk is used in action in a MSE setting. As argued in the literature review, and as stated by Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016), most prior accounting talk literature has focused on larger organizations. As we further have shown, analyzing existing literature with the help of the sensemaking framework by Cornelissen, J.P. (2012) that explicitly draws on the use of metaphors in creating sense, some studies of larger organizations show how accounting talk is employed in primarily shifting and narration strategies in making sense. Although not explicitly stated, the study by Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016) opens up the possibility that the noted discrepancy may be linked to the overrepresentation of accounting talk literature focusing on large organizations. Our study is an attempt to widen the academic understanding of how accounting talk is employed in smaller organizations as well as whether it plays a distinct role for MSE's.

As we have argued, accounting talk is inherently an informal process and MSE's have in multiple articles been characterized as having predominantly informal accounting practices (Liberman-Yaconi et al., 2009; Berrone et al., 2013) that often is a strategic choice or necessity for smaller firms (Shields & Shelleman, 2016). Our study in particular shows how the owner-manager, the COO in this study, uses accounting talk to bring meaning to his view of resource allocation and customer prioritization. By centering discussions around four specific dimensions (Order value, PR value, Realization value and ROI value), value was implicitly assigned to these aspects of customer worth, while other potential dimensions were excluded. As Young (2013) notes, metaphors and language serve to highlight certain features while downplaying others, shaping what is considered valuable. Our study therefore also contributes to the understanding of "meaning power" in accounting talk, as discussed by Kraus and Strömsten (2016). Further, as noted by Englund & Gerdin (2014), we show that managers draw on various aspects and accounting information when trying to confirm their gut feelings of organizational realities. The workshop day yielded many insights into how the use of accounting talk can unfold in practice in a smaller organization. As our study shows, the PSF only received meaning via verbal communication. Our study hence confirms the wider notion that accounting talk brings meaning to accounting information (Abrahamsson et al., 2016; Ahrens, 1997; Baker et al., 2022; Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Fauré and Rouleau, 2011; Hall, 2010; Jönsson and Solli, 1993; Kraus and Strömsten, 2016; Preston, 1986; Puyou, 2018). This was mostly seen when the PSF's scoring levels were discussed and the COO used prior customers that the rest of the group were familiar with, as a common source of knowledge in order to explain what high and low values of the PSF meant. Hence, our study confirms studies (Ahrens, 1997; Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Jönsson and Solli, 1993; Young, 2013) that, in line with our study, shows how the use of metaphors and other ways of relating to prior knowledge bases give meaning to accounting information.

Interestingly and importantly for our study, the physical PSF only existed as an excel file with an appendix containing little interpretive value. The majority of the understanding of the PSF was co-created during the day via accounting talk. As the meaning of the words "Order value", "PR value", "ROI value" and "Realization Value" was discussed the system became more colorful and informative than the physical excel file. Hence we argue that in the end, the only system that existed, existed in the talk and via the metaphors and examples that had been used to give the system its meaning. The physical PSF, the excel file, had become obsolete. We can thus confirm Puyou's (2018) finding that accounting talk is not merely a way of interpreting existing information, but can also serve as a medium that contains and transmits distinct information not found in formal reports or systems. The observation shows that it was the debate over the system's value, the meaning of its terms, and the desirability of balance between the numbers that ultimately drove the group to agree on its meaning, even if they remained divided on whether the system should be formally implemented. Hence, our study further supports the argument made by Abrahamsson et al. (2016) that the inherent ambiguity in accounting information can act as a catalyst for sensemaking. It also echoes Fauré and Rouleau's (2011) finding that accounting information needs to be translated and connected to operational realities for organizational actors to understand it and reach a shared interpretation.

As stated above, the PSF in itself received meaning via the examples and metaphors that management used to convey the system, however in that process of conveying the meaning of the system the underlying aim of the managers also received an arena for attention. During the workshop, as well as during our interview with the COO, it became clear that the underlying aim was to convey the necessity for the organization to think in terms of how to prioritize the firm's limited resources. Resource allocation, although rarely explicitly stated as the firm's cash, was mainly discussed in terms of how much time the salespeople spend on different tasks and customers. This is similar to how Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016) shows that the caregivers' time spent on tasks was related to the unit's revenues, underlining the relevance of using metaphorical accounting talk to cater towards the relevant audience.

Rather quickly, and perhaps ironically, the salespeople who argued against the system's implementation, started using the vocabulary of the system. The more the system was discussed, explained, and debated the more the system started to represent a cohesive language that the organizational actors used to understand each other. Moreover, the language as a whole carried the implicit assumption that maintaining a balance between these different perspectives was important. This idea was conveyed both figuratively through the COO's fifth column, where the values from each perspective were summed into a single number, and more explicitly by the CEO, who emphasized the importance of not only achieving high "PR value" but also maintaining sufficient "Order value". Our study hence confirms that managers typically interact with accounting information through verbal communication, in meetings, calls, and informal exchanges (Hall, 2010).

We argue that the shared language created by the group functions as a broad, overarching metaphor (a higher-order metaphor), which includes vocabulary consisting of smaller, more specific metaphors (lower-order metaphors), that give structure and meaning to the language itself. The lower-order metaphors were used to understand the high and low scores. For example a smaller customer was used to describe a low Order value customer, while a larger customer was used to convey what a high score for Order value stood for. Conversely, a high value on Order value acted as a metaphor for a customer similar to a large customer. When this vocabulary, that was discussed and developed, was put into use by the actors to convey further meaning, a new language was created. The managers, by giving voice to their desire of prioritizing leads in terms of a balance of both financial and non-financial justifications, charged the language itself with this meaning. Hence the language became a higher-order metaphor for the need to think economically with time allocation. This co-creation of the language as well as its higher- and lower order metaphors is visualized in Figure 3.

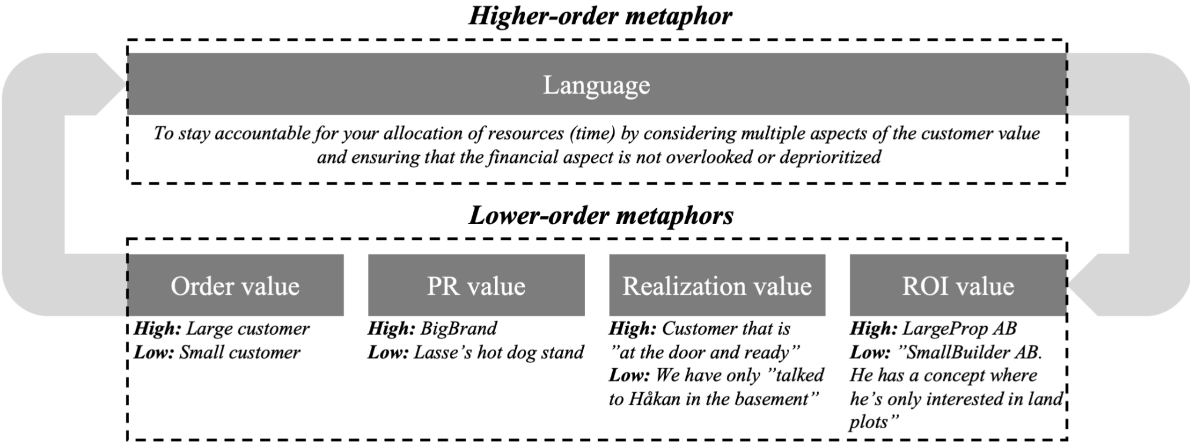

Figure 3. A Discursive model of PropSoft's language creation

5.2. Leveraging Language to Bridge the Tension Between Formality and Informality

Using Cornelissen, J.P. (2012) framework of sensemaking we believe some particularly interesting insights can be extracted from the study. We argue that the focal organization for this study, PropSoft, is characterized with high role-situated commitment both from managers but also from the sellers. This was perhaps most evident when the skeptical salesperson 1 highlighted the disconnect between the proposed formal PSF and the nature of sales work, remarking, *"But we're not supposed to be engineers"*. The skeptical salesperson 1 hence gives voice to his commitment to his understanding of his role as a seller, within which assigning *"a two and then a five"* to the customers is not included. We hence argue that he shows high role-situated commitment to the sales role. The COO's and CEO's role-situated commitment are arguably also high since they clearly show a need to communicate their views on how the operations should be run effectively. For example, by expressing that his "gut feeling" is something everyone else should learn, the COO reveals that he identifies with his role-situated commitment as an owner-manager. Although Cornelissen, J.P. (2012) does state that role identity and role-situated commitment does not necessarily have to always occur simultaneously, they do tend to correlate.

What further is seen from our study is how salience of others' expectations is high at PropSoft. According to Cornelissen, J.P. (2012) when salience of others' expectations is high their views are both known and powerful. We argue that because of the smaller size of the focal organization the points of interaction become much larger compared to larger firms and hence the salience of others' expectations is inherently high in these smaller firms.

Furthermore, during the workshop day, both the management's and the sellers' expectations became salient to a degree requiring this dimension of Cornelissen, J.P. (2012) framework to be viewed as high. When Cornelissen, J.P. (2012) talks about framing, he describes the situation where such a strategy is best suited as characterized by the salience of others' expectations being particularly strongly felt and clashing with the professional's own convictions and beliefs. We therefore argue that our study illustrates a situation that requires strategic "framing" to navigate the tension between the need for formalization and the desire to avoid bureaucratic processes.

On the basis of the interview with the COO, we argue that he uses a more subtle, almost (as he himself puts it) "manipulative" approach to "framing" and bridging between the management's need for a PSF and the sellers' need not to implement bureaucracy. By introducing the PSF and using metaphors to give the system meaning he starts by *"painting a corner of the wall"* in the color he prefers and does not jump to demanding the full implementation of the formal system, which would be analogous to painting the whole "wall" directly. As the PSF is discussed and given meaning via talk, it is simultaneously co-created. Created by talk and existing only via talk. That the PSF only exists in talk is evident during the weeks that follow where our observation shows the linguistic use of the co-created language without any referral to a formal and physical system.

The framework of Cornelissen, J.P. (2012) yields insights into how accounting talk in PropSoft is used as a sensemaking tool to bridge diverging and normatively powerful salient expectations. Our study shows that accounting talk can act as a bridging mechanism, or as Cornelissen, J.P. (2012) puts it "framing" mechanism, when the main tension to bridge is that between the need for formalization and yet the expectations of not introducing bureaucratic processes. We argue, on the basis of our observations, that what makes accounting talk particularly well suited to bridge informality and formality is its potential in creating a *higher-order metaphor* via the co-creation of a language that provides the organizational understanding of a certain need, without demanding formal bureaucratic processes to do so.

We further show that the specific tension between the need for formality and the resistance of bureaucracy present in our study, can be connected to the size of the organization. This was for example evident when the COO stated in the interview that "*We are in a phase now where it would never have worked for me to demand compliance to a system. That would have* *created too much bureaucracy"*. It is the researchers' understanding from the context of the particulate interview that "*phase*" refers to the smaller size of PropSoft. Our study suggests that talk not only serves to bring meaning to accounting information and make it actionable through lower-order metaphors, but also helps bridge diverging internal expectations within the organization through higher-order metaphors. The latter finding hence expands the current understanding of accounting talk and points towards the future value in studying accounting talk in MSEs where the specific tension between formality and informality is prevalent.

According to the COO, *"the system is already in use; people are talking in terms of 'this customer does not bring in so much money but the PR-value is good.' And that is proof that the idea has already landed"*. A key strength of our study, however, is that we are not confined to accepting the COO's perspective at face value. Since we observed weekly meetings for several weeks after the workshop, we collected firsthand observations demonstrating that the co-constructed language developed during the workshop successfully bridged the management's commitment to formalizing a PSF with the sales team's resistance to bureaucratic processes. We observed several instances where both salespeople and managers used the shared language to justify their resource allocation decisions, despite the lack of any formalized system requiring them to do so. The Monday meetings were expressed to be about "*the hottest leads and what is on top of the agenda*" and no demand was explicitly made to make the salespeople argue for their time allocation. Yet, it was clear that the four scoring categories were implicitly guiding their arguments and decisions for why time was spent on one specific customer. These post-workshop meetings revealed that an expectation to justify time allocation had emerged *informally*, even though no explicit directive had been introduced. The co-created language hence carried an implicit expectation that one can not "*just go with gut feeling and never be able to account for how you prioritize things*". Our study further demonstrates that the informal expectation to justify time and resource allocation in accordance with the PSF remained consistent throughout the study period, indicating that the PSF and its associated values exhibit enduring characteristics.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of accounting talk in a micro and small enterprise setting. MSEs are widely recognized for relying more heavily on informal accounting practices compared to larger organizations (Liberman-Yaconi et al., 2009; Berrone et al., 2013; Greenbank, 1999; McCarthy, 2003). Since accounting talk is in itself an informal way of engaging with accounting information, its role in such contexts becomes particularly interesting. Prior research has largely focused on accounting talk within larger firms (Abrahamsson et al., 2016; Ahrens, 1997; Baker et al., 2022; Fauré and Rouleau, 2011; Kraus and Strömsten, 2016; Preston, 1986; Puyou, 2018), highlighting the novelty and relevance of our case study in a MSE setting.

In answering our first research question *"In what ways does accounting talk shape shared understandings of strategic priorities in micro and small enterprises?",* we affirm the broader understanding that accounting talk functions as a way for organizational actors to interpret and make sense of accounting information (Abrahamsson et al., 2016; Ahrens, 1997; Baker et al., 2022; Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Fauré and Rouleau, 2011; Hall, 2010; Jönsson and Solli, 1993; Kraus and Strömsten, 2016; Preston, 1986; Puyou, 2018). It is through conversation and debate that numerical and strategic information is given meaning, placing accounting talk at the very heart of organizational sensemaking. Moreover, we confirm that metaphors are a powerful tool in this process, allowing individuals to interpret financial information by connecting it to prior knowledge and alternative domains (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Young, 2013).

Our study extends the understanding of the link between accounting talk and metaphors by demonstrating the existence and function of higher-order metaphors. These metaphors do more than clarify specific accounting information, they serve as overarching cognitive frameworks that guide collective understanding and action. We found that in situations where there is a tension between the need to formalize processes and a simultaneous resistance to bureaucratic systems, accounting talk becomes a critical bridge between the formal and the informal. Through such talk, organizations co-create a shared language, rooted in everyday understanding, that enables them to address complex issues without the need for rigid structures.

In our case organization, a shared vocabulary emerged to help prioritize among different customer types. This vocabulary gained meaning through metaphorical comparisons with current clients. More importantly, the very existence of the new language acted as a higher-order metaphor, a symbol, reminding organizational actors of the need to balance various dimensions of the value of a customer. It underscored, for example, that financial contributions could not be deprioritized in favor of intangible aspects like PR value. This notion was able to be created and subsequently recreated over several weeks without the need for formal structures.

We argue that this finding is particularly important given that tensions between formal and informal practices are likely omnipresent in smaller organizations. We therefore also answer the second research question *"How is accounting talk used to resolve tensions between formality and informality in micro and small enterprises?"*. The emergence of higher-order metaphors, that exists only in talk, demonstrates how accounting talk can fulfill specific organizational needs in the absence of formal systems. This suggests that accounting talk in MSEs may not only supplement but sometimes even substitute for formal structures. In this sense, organizations are not just *walking the talk*, but also, crucially, *talking the walk*.

As outlined in the methodology, our study is based on a single case study and therefore has limited generalizability, opening avenues for further research in MSEs. Moreover, the study lacks comparative insights across smaller firms, limiting our ability to assess how such firms more broadly use accounting talk to construct shared meaning and bridge tensions. In addition, because our observations did not capture how accounting talk was used prior to the workshop, we cannot conclusively determine whether the workshop itself influenced the adoption or use of the PSF. Future research could address these limitations by employing a comparative or quantitative approach to explore how similar workshops or pivotal events affect accounting discourse and sensemaking processes. Further, future research could focus on investigating similar co-created systems over a longer time horizon. Future work could also explore how accounting talk functions across different sizes and types of organizations, and further investigate its capacity to generate higher-order metaphors that serve as proxies for formal systems, especially in contexts where such systems are impractical or resisted due to their formal nature.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A. Summary of the empirical data collection occasions

#	Date	Participants	Duration	Type
1	2025-02-24	COO, CEO, CFO, Salesperson 1-4	9 Hours	Observation
2	2025-03-10	CEO, Salesperson 1-4	60 min	Observation
3	2025-03-17	CEO, Salesperson 1-4	45 min	Observation
4	2025-03-17	COO	30 min	Interview
5	2025-03-24	CEO,COO, Salesperson 1-4	70 min	Observation
6	2025-04-07	CEO,COO, Salesperson 1-4	60 min	Observation
7	2025-04-14	CEO,COO, Salesperson 1-4	55 min	Observation
8	2025-04-14	Salesperson 2	45 min	Interview
9	2025-04-28	CEO, Salesperson 1-4	60 min	Observation

Appendix B. Illustrative interview guide with the COO

Categories	Example questions
Formalities	- Introduction to the study - Discuss GDPR regulations - Discuss confidentiality - Discuss recording consent
Introduction	- Could you tell me about your role as COO and how long you've been with the company? - What are your main responsibilities in relation to sales strategy and performance evaluation?
PSF development	- What motivated the creation of the PSF? - How did you decide on the specific evaluation criteria? - In what ways does the PSF reflect your personal approach to decision-making?
Intuition vs formality	- You mentioned relying on gut feeling, how do you reconcile that with formal systems like the PSF? - Has the process of trying to formalize your intuition changed how you think about decisions? - Do you see the PSF as a tool for learning, control, or alignment?
Accounting talk	- How do you introduce or explain financial tools like the PSF to others in the team? - What kinds of conversations typically emerge when discussing these tools? - Can you recall a moment when a discussion about a lead score led to a shift in understanding or priority?
Perceived impact	- How do you think the sales team has responded to the PSF? - Have there been misunderstandings or resistance? If so, how have you addressed them? - What have you learned from observing how the tool is used in practice?
Organizational tensions	- Have you experienced any tension between the desire for informal decision-making and the need to be structured? - How do you balance those in a growing but still small company?
Ending	- Is there anything we have not covered that you feel is important? - Do you have any questions about the study or next steps?

Appendix C. Illustrative interview guide with Salesperson 2

Categories	**Example questions**
Formalities	- Introduction to the study - Discuss GDPR regulations - Discuss confidentiality - Discuss recording consent
Introduction	- Can you briefly describe your role and daily tasks? - How long have you been part of the sales team here?
Experience with the PSF	- How were you introduced to the PSF? - What was your first impression of it? - Do you use it when evaluating leads? If yes, how? If not, why?
Perception of usefulness	- In your view, does the PSF help clarify priorities or add complexity? - Are there certain criteria (like PR value or ROI value) that feel more relevant than others?
Accounting talk	- How often do you discuss lead prioritization with others? - What kinds of conversations happen around numbers and scores? - Have you ever had a conversation where someone's explanation of a score changed how you saw the lead?
Intuition vs system	- Do you prefer using your own judgment or the PSF when deciding who to follow up with? - Has the PSF ever challenged your instinct about a lead? - Do you feel like you can openly challenge or question the PSF?
Cultural fit and resistance	- Do you think tools like the PSF fit the culture of this company? - What do you think when someone says "we're not supposed to be engineers assigning grades"?
Strategic alignment	- Do you think the team has a shared understanding of what makes a good lead? - Has the PSF helped or hindered that alignment?
Ending	- Is there anything we have not covered that you feel is important? - Do you have any questions about the study or next steps?

Appendix D. Usage of AI in thesis writing

No AI tools were used directly in the writing, data collection, or analysis stages of this thesis. Our use of AI was intentionally limited to two support functions: conducting web searches and assisting with language-related tasks such as grammar refinement and title formatting. Occasionally, we used ChatGPT to generate suggestions for further readings. For instance, we might input a preliminary conclusion and ask for literature recommendations to help us expand or deepen our analysis and discussion. All interview material was transcribed manually, without the use of AI or transcription software. Similarly, we translated all Swedish interview excerpts into English ourselves to maintain full control over interpretation and to ensure data confidentiality. Data security was a priority throughout. No interview content or sensitive material was shared with AI tools, and all analysis and synthesis were conducted by the authors. While AI tools did not influence the substance of our thesis, they provided minor administrative support that allowed us to focus more fully on analytical and interpretive work. Its contribution was indirect, but helpful in improving our overall efficiency.