

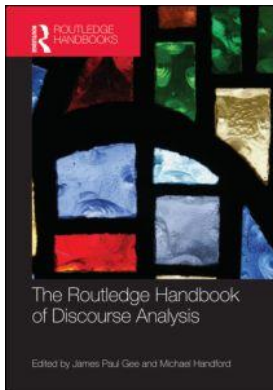
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Spoken professional genres

Almut Koester and Michael Handford

Introduction

What do business meetings, job interviews and medical consultations have in common? The answer is that they are all examples of spoken professional interactions. However, arguably, these different types of professional interaction are defined more by what distinguishes them from one another than by what they have in common. Genre analysis is a particular type of discourse analysis that aims to identify the specific nature of such specialized types of interaction, whether they are written or spoken. However, as shown in previous chapters on genre in this volume, there is no uniform approach to deciding how genres should be defined and described. For some, a common communicative purpose is what all instances of a specific genre share (Swales, 1990), while for others it is the way a text or interaction is structured that determines whether it belongs to one genre or another (Hasan, 1985). In this chapter, two specific ways of seeing genre will be elaborated in detail: genre as communicative purpose and genre as staged practice. We begin with an overview of different approaches to describing and analysing genre and we discuss their relevance to the still developing field of spoken professional genre.

Describing spoken professional genres

Three main approaches to genre analysis have emerged over the last few decades, and while some have focused more on written than spoken genre, they are all relevant to a discussion of spoken professional genre.

Many descriptions of written academic and professional genres are influenced by Swales' (1990) pioneering work on the introduction section of academic articles. For Swales (1990: 58), it is communicative purpose that defines a genre:

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes.

Furthermore, he asserts that the shared communicative purpose of texts belonging to the same genre results in their having a similar 'structure, style, content and intended audience' (ibid., p. 58). Based on this premise, Swales developed a 'move' and 'step' analysis specifying the rhetorical functions of each element within the genre and where each element performs a more specific function, which serves the overall communicative purpose of the genre. Swales' approach lends itself well to describing specialized written genres such as sales promotional letters or legal cases (Bhatia, 1993), which follow quite sophisticated and complex, but also predictable, rhetorical patterns.

When it comes to spoken, dialogically constructed genres, the rhetorical strategies adopted by the speakers, and therefore the detailed structure of the genre, are much less predictable. This is

probably the reason why descriptions of spoken genre tend to focus on global patterns at a general level of description, some of which are ‘obligatory’, whereas others are ‘optional’. This approach was developed within systemic functional linguistics, originally by Hasan (1985), who studied service encounters and proposed that this genre could be described as consisting of the following obligatory and optional elements:

- Obligatory elements: sales request, sales compliance, sale, purchase, purchase closure
- Optional elements: greeting, sales initiation, sales enquiry, finish

While genre analysis in this tradition has examined written as well as spoken genre, the focus has been on general and ‘everyday’ genres such as narratives, explanations and procedures (Martin and Rothery, 1986; however, see Christie and Martin, 1997). This contrasts with the more specific descriptions of written academic and professional genres, carried out using the Swalesian approach.

Finally, the so-called ‘social constructionist’ approach does not focus on the formal properties of genres, but is interested in how genres are used by academic and professional discourse communities (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995). Devitt’s (1991) much-cited study of the range of written genres used by tax accountants examines the ways in which these genres are linked to one another and ‘essentially constitute and govern the tax accounting community, defining and reflecting that community’s epistemology and values’ (pp. 336–337).

In this tradition, genre is viewed as ‘rhetorical action’ (Miller, 1984), and Yates and Orlikowski (1992) adopt this approach to describe ‘genres of organizational communication’, which are defined as ‘typified communicative action invoked in response to a recurrent situation’ (p. 301). They see genre as being characterized by both ‘substance’ (which equates more or less to communicative purpose) and ‘form’, which includes structural and linguistic features but may also include elements of the context, for example the presence of an agenda and a chairperson for a meeting. As the situations within which genres occur are subject to socio-historical change, genres are seen as inherently dynamic, changing and evolving in response to the changing needs of the discourse community (Miller, 1984; Yates and Orlikowski, 1992; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995).

Written professional genre has received considerably more attention than spoken professional genre, although a wide range of institutional and professional interaction types – such as meetings, negotiations and interviews – have been examined using other analytical methods, for instance conversation analysis (e.g. Drew and Heritage, 1992) or ethnography (e.g. Duranti and Goodwin, 1992). Business meetings have been analysed as genre, starting with Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris’ (1997) work comparing British and Italian corporate meetings, and more recently Handford (2010a) has proposed a generic structure for meetings based on a corpus of 64 meetings. Koester (2006) and Müller (2006) have identified and described a range of genres occurring across different workplace contexts, such as decision-making, planning/making arrangements, presentations, procedural encounters and training. Such recent work (e.g. Koester, 2006; Handford, 2010a) has shown that combining an analysis of the structural features of the genre, for example by identifying the different ‘moves’ or ‘stages’, with corpus analytical methods, whereby frequent linguistic features are investigated, can provide robust and multi-faceted accounts of spoken professional genre.

Genre and spoken corpora

Some of the earliest work on genre and corpora was conducted by Biber (e.g. 1988), who focused primarily on the pervasive linguistic patterns in different spoken and written genres (conversations

and interviews; fiction and letters, respectively). While Biber's corpus-informed work (see Biber, this volume) continues to deepen our understanding of textual features of comparative genres and registers, it is primarily concerned with the linguistic aspects of the language/context relationship. The language/context relationship means the way language and other relevant features of the unfolding genre (such as the status of speakers, previous encounters or texts, the location, and so on) interact and constitute meaning. This section will briefly outline some other studies that have been concerned with exploring the relationship between text and context that go beyond the linguistic level.

In comparing developments in written and spoken genres and the language/context relationship, Bhatia (2004) draws the following distinction: while written genre analysis has moved from analysis of the language to the wider social context, particularly the reflexive relationship between genres and social practices, studies of spoken genres have progressed in the opposite direction and have only involved close analysis of the language used in the last two or three decades. Arguably, this is partly because the close analysis of spoken texts has only recently been possible: the development and availability of audio/video recorders have permitted the systematic study of individual speech events, and computers have enabled researchers to analyse and notice patterns across large collections of texts. The study of collections of machine-readable texts using computers is indeed one definition of corpus linguistics (Biber, 1988), and this approach has led to considerable developments and insights in the analysis of spoken genres. This is because corpus linguistics and genre analysis can complement each other: whereas corpora enable a fine grained analysis of language, their contextual interpretability can be insufficient; genres, on the other hand, are by definition contextual, but their linguistic features may not be adequately explored (Handford, 2010b).

Handford (2010b) discusses different types of corpora of specialized genres with specific reference to spoken discourse – specifically how smaller, specialized corpora, as opposed to more general, much larger corpora such as the British National Corpus (see Flowerdew, 2005), can inform the analysis of genre from all of the three perspectives discussed in section 'describing spoken professional genres'. For instance, work on the Michigan University MICASE corpus has shed considerable light on academic lectures, dissertation defences and meetings from a Swalesian perspective (Simpson, 2004; Swales, 2004).¹ Koester (2006, see below), also using a Swalesian definition of genre, shows that even a modest spoken corpus of under 50,000 words can be used to examine the occurrence of high frequency items in workplace genres. In her corpus of American and British office talk (ABOT), a number of interpersonal linguistic features, such as modal verbs, hedges and vague language, are compared across a range of workplace genres, including decision-making, procedural encounters and planning/making arrangements. Carter and McCarthy's work on CANCODE, the 5 million word corpus of spoken English, provides powerful insights into intimate, socializing, pedagogical, professional and transactional discourse (see McCarthy, 1998), not least in terms of the interpersonal aspects (Halliday, 1994) and fluidity (Bazerman, 1994) of various transactional and interpersonal genres (Carter, 2004; O'Keeffe *et al.*, 2007). For example, McCarthy (2000) shows how, in a transactional service encounter in a hairdressing salon, over 90 per cent of the communication is interpersonal in nature. He concludes that our notions of transactional genres need to be able to account for such findings. Such findings also show that we need to be wary of attributing too rigid a framework to genres, which are by nature slippery and dynamic, as discussed in the next section. Handford's work on business meetings (2010a), discussed in the section on genre as staged practice, is an attempt, following Bhatia (2004), to account for both the regularity and dynamism that is apparent in CANBEC, a corpus of inter-organizational and intra-organizational meetings. As such, it draws on the three approaches to genre outlined above.

What counts as genre?

In the descriptions of genre surveyed in the section on spoken professional genres, both communicative goal and structural features emerge as important aspects of genre. And indeed, the notion of genre as staged, goal-oriented activity seems to provide a useful approach for trying to make sense of both the great diversity of interactions taking place in professional situations and also of their repetitive nature. But how does one decide what ‘counts’ as genre, and whether two spoken interactions are examples of the same genre or not? For example, are internal planning meetings within a company or department and external sales meetings (between two companies) both examples of the same genre – the business meeting – or do they constitute two different genres? This depends very much, of course, on how genre is defined. If the communicative purpose is taken as the sole or main criterion for defining genre, then the business meeting would not constitute a genre, as different types of meetings will have different purposes. However, if other criteria, such as structure, are considered to be defining, then the business meeting is indeed a genre, as meetings tend to follow a particular pattern (see the section on genre as staged practice, below).

Yates and Orlikowski (1992) provide a useful perspective on the question of what counts as a genre. They hold that it is possible for genres to be either very general or very specific, as long as ‘a recurrent situation, a common subject (either very general or more specific), and common formal features’ can be identified. Genres thus exist at various levels of abstraction:

the business letter and the meeting might at one point be genres, whereas at another point, these types of communication might be considered too general and the recommendation letter or the personnel committee meeting might better capture the social sense of recurrent situation.

(Yates and Orlikowski, 1992: 303)

Yates and Orlikowski suggest that more general genres can be viewed as having sub-genres at various levels of specificity, for example the genre of business meetings could comprise more specific sub-genres, as shown in Figure 18.1.

Another useful view of the relationship between different genres comes from Bhatia’s (2004: 57–84) description of ‘colonies’ of written genres. Besides including the idea that more general genres are composed of more specific sub-genres, the notion of ‘genre colony’ also deals with the phenomenon of related genres that have similar, but not necessarily identical, communicative purposes. Colonies are groupings of genres, some of which are very closely related (‘primary members’), while others are not as central to the colony (‘secondary’ and ‘peripheral’ members). The genres in the colony all largely share a communicative purpose, but are different in a number of respects, such as discipline, profession, contexts of use or participant relationship. An example is the colony of promotional genres, which includes ‘primary members’ such as advertisements, promotional letters and job applications, as these have the primary communicative purpose of ‘promoting a product or service to a potential customer’ (Bhatia, 2004: 60). ‘Secondary’ members of the colony would not be considered advertisements, but nevertheless have a strong promotional concern, for example fundraising letters or travel brochures; whereas ‘peripheral’ genres will have other communicative purposes as well, and may be primary members in other genre colonies. For

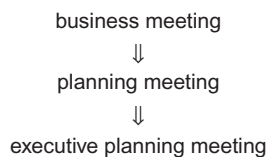


Figure 18.1 Genres and sub-genres

example, annual company reports belong primarily to the colony of reporting genres, but also have the purpose of promoting the company (ibid., p. 62).

Bhatia is concerned with written professional genres, but his idea of genre colonies can also be applied to spoken professional genres. The two genre colonies mentioned, promotional and reporting, also include spoken genres, for example:

- promotional: sales presentations, job interviews
- reporting: reporting back about a fair or convention, presentation of quarterly sales figures

In some contexts, presenting sales figures could also have a promotional dimension, and therefore this genre might be a peripheral member of the colony of promotional genres.

McCarthy (1998) proposes a corpus-based approach to exploring the overlap between related genres. Using data from CANCODE (see above), he examines how different variables or dimensions combine to form specific genres, and how small changes in these variables result in more or less subtle changes to the specific genre being performed (pp. 38–46). One dimension according to which all encounters in the corpus are categorized is ‘goal type’, for example ‘collaborative task’ or ‘information provision’. Two of the encounters he compares involve decision-making or planning encounters (a sub-goal type of collaborative task). While the sub-goal type is the same, the two encounters differ in their ‘context’ (another key variable in the corpus referring to the relationship between the participants): one involves planning a family holiday (‘intimate’ context) and the other is a planning meeting in a publishing company (‘professional’ context). The two encounters are similar in a number of respects: they are both informal and there is a high degree of shared knowledge between the participants. However, the professional encounter has more indirect language, less deixis (i.e. use of deictics like *this*, *there*, *that* to refer to things in the immediate environment) and a slightly higher lexical density² than the intimate encounter. It is the subtle difference in the precise goals of the two encounters, in the relationship between the participants (including the degree of intimacy and shared knowledge) and in other contextual features that results in the somewhat different generic patterning of these two decision-making encounters. Most significantly, the participants in the planning meeting must orient to institutional deadlines and targets, which is obviously not the case in planning a family holiday. Balancing these goals with relational concerns (or ‘face work’) results in the use of more indirect language in the publisher’s meeting.

From McCarthy’s comparison of the family and company planning meetings, we can see that genres like ‘decision-making’ and ‘planning’ occur in social as well as professional situations. There is therefore no clear dividing line between ‘everyday’ and ‘professional’ spoken genres, but similar or related genres occur in social AND professional situations. As McCarthy’s examples show, what distinguishes professional genres is the institutional goals and role relationships. This point will be developed more what follows.

Genre as communicative purpose

As the discussion above has shown, generic description can be either fairly general (e.g. ‘meetings’) or, alternatively, very specialized; for example, genres which are perhaps unique to specific professions or organizations can be described (e.g. weekly team meetings of the IT department). In order to compare genres across different organizations and workplaces, it is necessary to take a more broad-brush approach, focusing on genres that are widely used and not too specialized.

Two studies that have attempted to identify frequently occurring spoken genres across different workplace contexts are Koester (2006) and Müller (2006). In both studies, the genres have been

Table 18.1 Frequently occurring workplace genres

<i>Müller's 8 genres (2006)</i>	<i>Koester's (2006) 10 genres ABOT</i>
1) Private conversations	1) Small talk
2) Contact conversation	2) Office gossip
3) Presentation talks	3) reporting
-	4) Briefing
-	5) Requesting
4) Training talks	6) Service encounters
5) Evaluation (appraisal) conversations	7) Procedural and directive discourse
6) planning conversations	-
7) Crisis conversations	8) Decision-making
-	9) Making arrangements
8) Analysis talks	10) Discussing and evaluating

identified largely on the basis of the communicative goals of the interactions. Although the genre categories arrived at are not identical, there are clearly similarities and overlaps, as indicated in Table 18.1 (see also Koester, 2010).

Neither Koester nor Müller claim to present a complete taxonomy of spoken workplace genres, but rather a descriptive list of the genres identified in each corpus. It is interesting that there is, nevertheless, substantial overlap in the genres identified, although the data were collected in different countries (Koester's from the UK and US, and Müller's from Germany, France and Spain) and quite different workplace environments (Koester's from offices, and Müller's from factories). This seems to indicate that many of these genres are very widespread indeed in spoken workplace communication.

Basing a classification of genre on communicative purpose is, however, not unproblematic. Speakers may have more than one communicative goal in an interaction, and the goals of the speakers may not all be the same. Even more fundamental is the question of how speakers' communicative goals can be identified, as we cannot 'get inside' speakers' heads. Koester (2006) draws on the notions of 'contextualization cues' (Gumperz, 1982, 1992) and 'frames' (Goffman, 1974; Tannen, 1993), developed within interactional sociolinguistics in order to try to identify clues to speakers' communicative intentions in the discourse. According to Gumperz (1982, 1992), speakers and listeners use 'contextualization cues' to signal and make inferences about communicative goals. Contextualization cues are 'any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions' (1982: 131), and can be signalled through any aspect of linguistic or paralinguistic behaviour, from prosody to lexical forms through to choice of code or style. Frames are the participants' sense of what they are doing, or what activity they are engaged in (Tannen, 1993), and they are also signalled through a variety of surface level forms, including false starts, modals and hedges. This method, therefore, involves finding clues in what participants say or do to what genre they see themselves as 'doing'; it is not about trying to identify what their personal goals and motivations in the interaction are.

In order to demonstrate how generic frames can be inferred from what speakers say, an example of a decision-making encounter from the ABOT corpus will be examined (see also Koester, 2006: 35–41). Decision-making is the most frequently occurring genre in ABOT, and has also been identified as a key activity in other studies of workplace and professional discourse (Willing, 1992; Handford, 2010a). Previous studies have identified three stages in decision-making or problem-solving encounters (Willing, 1992; Hundsnurscher, 1986), following the general pattern of:

- 1) identifying or describing a problem or issue
- 2) discussion and problem-solving
- 3) deciding and agreeing on a course of action

The encounter to be examined is from the back office of an American food cooperative, and involves co-workers trying to decipher an item on a handwritten list on which co-workers in the 'deli' section of the co-op's shop must write down anything they take from the shop for cooking. Ann is the bookkeeper and Greta is a co-worker who shares the same office space:

Example 1 Deciphering Handwriting

1. <Ann> Anyone wanna decipher handwriting?
2. <Greta> I will. I will.
3. <Ann> What's *this*.
- [3]
4. <Greta> Showy.
- [3]
5. <Greta> i::ts a grocery, huh? sh::: Well /broccoli/ certainly isn't grocery,
6. <Ann> No:
7. <Greta> And... some kind of milk, isn't grocery,
8. <Ann> Buttermilk,... but that was by a different person. So Shannon?
9. <Greta> [Oh [/She put-/
- <Ann> ↓ Shannon's not /here/
10. <Greta> It looks like S-H.O-W-Y. showy.
11. <Ann> [Mhm
12. <Ann> or *soury*.... *soury*.
13. <Ann> (sou:r /I think that's a G/)
14. <Greta> *Where*.
15. <Ann> /Grewry/
16. <Greta> The first one?
17. <Ann> Mhm,
18. <Greta> Mm. ↓ No. it's /a-/ Let's see. I'm usually really good at this. ↑ Oh I think it's a- S.
19. <Ann> S-H, sh::: [4]
20. <Greta> sh:uzy. shorsy.
21. <Ann> [That's definitely a Y;, it's *definitely* a Y at the end.
22. <Greta> [Yeah,
23. <Greta> Mm begins with an S, an' ends with a Y.
24. <Ann> [Heheh
25. <Ann> That's good.
26. <Greta> And it's some number of letters in between. for two-nineteen.
- [10 turns ellipted]
27. <Ann> I *would* say *sherry*, but I don't think we *have* *sherry*. Do we have *cooking* *sherry*?
- [2.5]
28. <Greta> ↑Oh, maybe we do,
29. <Ann> S-H-E, R-R-Y, that could be it, ↓ It's certainly /packaged grocery /?/?/... Think that might be *sherry*?
- [12]
30. <Greta> S-H *somethin*::' *somethin*'... *somethin*' Y,
31. <Ann> Mhm,

The word *decipher* in turn 1 signals a decision-making frame, as it indicates the existence of a problem (Ann cannot read a handwritten word) which needs to be solved (she needs to know what the word is). The formulation of this initial turn as a question is an indication of the interactive, collaborative nature of spoken genre; as Gumperz (1982: 167) notes, ‘the signalling of speech activities is not a matter of unilateral action but rather of speaker–listener coordination’. Ann effectively makes a bid to ‘do’ decision-making, which is taken up by Greta, who sits next to her, and responds *I will. I will*. In the rest of the encounter, the speakers orient to the decision-making frame initiated in the first turn. Both speakers put forward guesses or make suggestions as to what they think the word or individual letters could be, for example (contextualization cues for generic activity are underlined):

Example 2

11. Greta It looks like S-H-O-W-Y. showy.
12. Ann | Mhm
13. Ann or *soury*... soury.
14. Ann (sou:r I think that’s a G)
15. Greta *Where*.
16. Ann /Grewry/
17. Greta The first one?
18. Ann Mhm,
19. Greta Mm. ↓ No. it’s /a-/ Let’s see. I’m usually really good at this.
↑Oh I think it’s a- S.

Both speakers use verbs that involve hypothesizing (*look like, I think, let’s see*), and these contextualization cues are evidence of their engagement in the decision-making or problem-solving process. According to Willing (1992), hypothesizing or making suppositions often occurs in the second phase of problem-solving, which he calls ‘deepening comprehension/interpreting’.

Analysis of all the decision-making conversations in the corpus showed that these usually follow a problem-solution pattern (Hoey, 1983, 1994), in which a problem is identified in a particular situation, and then a response or solution is proposed and then evaluated:

Situation → Problem → Response/Solution → Evaluation.

This pattern is also evident in the extract, with cyclical recurrence of the response and evaluation phases, as speakers make and reject various possibilities (e.g. *showy, soury, grewry*). For example, in turn 19 Greta disagrees that the first letter is a G, and in 25 Anna evaluates Greta’s suggestions positively:

Example 3

24. Greta Mm begins with an S, an’ ends with a Y.
25. Ann | Heheh
26. Ann That’s good.

In the end they seem to agree that the word is ‘sherry’.

This brief analysis shows how evidence for participants’ communicative goals, and thus the genre that is being performed, can be gleaned from the ways in which participants themselves ‘frame’ the encounter and the contextualization cues they provide through the language they use. This method of identifying genre is especially useful for a spoken genre, as many types of workplace interaction do not have ‘labels’, unlike written genres, which the discourse community has usually named (e.g. minutes, annual report, CV). The same method was applied to the other genres in the ABOT corpus listed above, and this meant that it was possible to track

changes from one genre to a different one, or the mixing or blending of genres, within the same encounter.

Genre as staged practice

Whereas the approach outlined in the previous section permits the pinpointing and description of genres in spoken encounters that may not have clear labels or stages, this section will discuss how genre analysis can be applied to a type of spoken encounter that does have stages and a recognized label, namely business meetings. Using the 900,000 words of meetings in the CANBEC (Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus) corpus, interpreted through reference to observation notes, interviews and expert informant comments, Handford (2010a) argues that meetings are genres that can be broken down into recurring stages and practices, and these stages and practices are invoked by recurring language items. However, like genre, practice is a slippery notion, and a certain degree of fuzziness is unavoidable when attempting to pin down practices.

As discussed in the section on what counts as a genre, interactions such as meetings can be categorized as genres if both the structure and the communicative purpose are considered, and Yates and Orlikowski’s (1992) distinction between a general level of genre (‘meeting’) and sub-genres (‘executive planning meeting’) is a useful heuristic when attempting to define and describe such encounters. This section will first discuss the stages of business meetings, and then outline how discursive practices, which link speaker goals with the language used, play a central role in the construction and interpretation of genres. Finally, an extract from a meeting between on-site engineers will be analysed.

Previous research on business meetings has proposed a three-stage framework (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1996, 1997; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003): an opening stage, a discussion stage, and a closing stage. Through an analysis of 64 meetings, Handford (2010a) argues for a more complex structure, comprising these three stages (which are obligatory) plus a further three stages and three transition moves (see Figure 18.2).

Whereas stage pre-2 refers to relevant work preceding the meeting, stage 4 includes the repercussions and effects of the meeting. Both stages tend to occur some time (an hour, a month etc.) apart from the meeting proper, and indicate how meetings can link with and make reference to other written and spoken encounters. This is important because meetings, like other genres, form genre chains (Swales, 2004) with other meetings, preceding and successive, as well as with genre colonies (Bhatia, 2004, see above). Both stages – pre-2 and 4 – are potentially optional, pre-stage 2 because

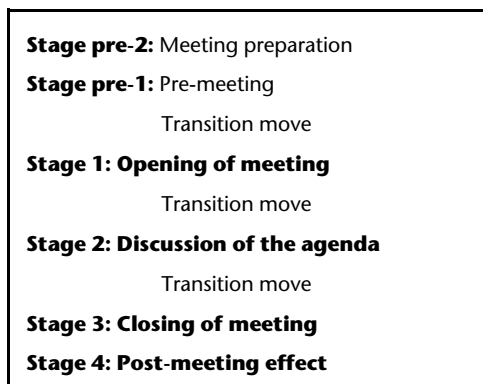


Figure 18.2 Structural aspects of the business meeting

some meetings occur spontaneously, and stage 4 because it is possible (although unlikely) to imagine a meeting that has no effects or repercussions. Similarly, the pre-meeting stage may be bypassed, especially in regular (daily or weekly) scheduled internal manager–subordinate meetings. However, it is common in internal meetings between managers and in external meetings, and it can involve ‘work talk, meeting preparatory talk and shop talk’ (Mirivel and Tracy, 2005: 1), as well as small talk. Stage 1 is usually enacted by the chair or the most senior person in internal meetings, but it may be less explicit in some meetings. The same can be said of stage 3.

Stage 2, the discussion of the agenda/topic, is usually made up of several ‘phases’ or ‘clusters of activity’ (Heritage, 1997: 167), each of which concerns a point of the (written or unwritten) agenda. Phases may be dealt with across turns in a linear fashion, or may be more cyclical, largely depending on the topic (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). For instance, decision-making may be rather cyclical, with speakers referring to previous topics and introducing new points in an apparently haphazard way. Stage 2 is the most important part of the meeting genre as this is when the business gets done; therefore an extract from this stage of a meeting is discussed below.

Practices, in particular repeated discursive practices that can be pinpointed through the use of corpora of specialized genre (Handford, 2010b), form the other dynamic in Handford’s (2010a) meeting–matrix genre. This is because discursive practices in a professional context are the local, goal-driven actions that members of a given community use to constrain and enable the unfolding genre through recognized language (for example, opening a meeting by saying ‘OK, let’s get started’). Drawing on work by Bhatia (2004, 2008) and Gee (2005; Gee *et al.*, 1996), Handford combines social, professional and discursive practices with Gee’s notion of ‘Discourses’ (bundles of social practices³) to show how these layers of context constitute the text, addressing the transactional and interpersonal goals of the interlocutors through language. The importance of practices to meaningful communication cannot be overstated: there can be no meaning without practices (Gee, 2005: 8), and communities of speakers such as engineers or lawyers can share meaning because they interpret practices in recognizable ways. Figure 18.3 outlines the relations between

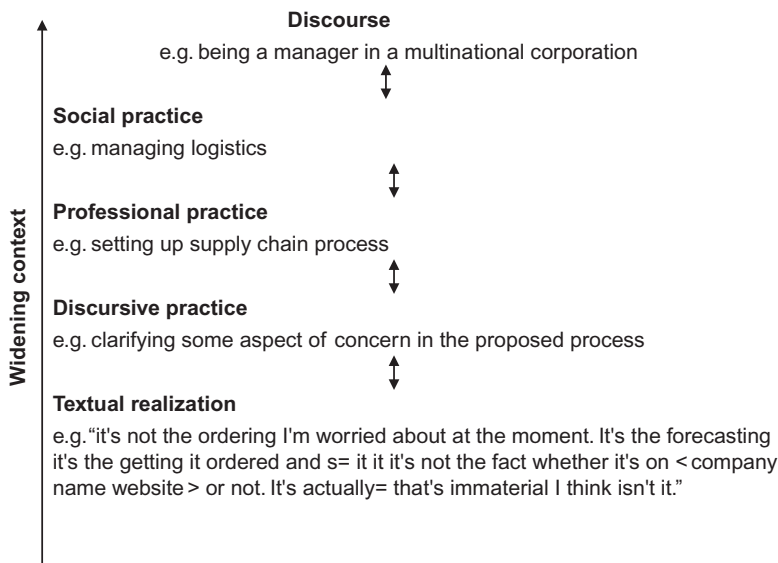


Figure 18.3 The relationship between discourses, practices, text and context

Source: CANBEC The Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus, which is part of the Cambridge International Corpus © Cambridge University Press

these levels of context through a brief extract from a logistics meeting (based on Handford, 2010a: 67). Discursive practices have the most direct relationship with the language produced, and the higher the level of context, the less direct the relationship.

A key question is how the discursive practices outlined above and the stages discussed here interact to construct the genre in question. The terms ‘agreeing with a suggestion’, ‘referring to previous topics’ and ‘introducing new points’ all refer to potential discursive practices typically found in stage 2, thus exemplifying how certain stages often feature recurrent practices (see Handford, 2010a: 77). Other examples include ‘outlining the agenda’ at the beginning of a meeting and ‘bringing meeting to a close’ at the end. Of course, several practices may not be so closely associated with particular stages, for instance ‘summarizing’ can occur at various points of a meeting.

An extract from an international professional meeting that is not from the CANBEC corpus will be analysed below, to show how the framework is relevant to other data sets. It is from a meeting between engineers on a tunnel construction project in Hong Kong (see Handford and Matous, 2010 for further details). The meeting is spontaneous and takes place in the office on site, immediately following the regular weekly meeting between the construction and engineering departments. The first speaker, Jimmy, is the head of the construction department (a 40–50-year-old male from Hong Kong); the second speaker, Alie, the head engineer from the engineering department (a 40–50-year-old male from Sierra Leone), is asking advice about certain problems concerning the part of the construction project he is managing. The meeting takes over 30 minutes, and this extract is from stage 2, discussion of the agenda/topic (in spontaneous meetings, the ‘agenda’ is usually unwritten, but at least one of the speakers will have a work-related topic or topics they want to discuss). This ‘phase’ concerns whether the position of one of the engineering job-sites can be moved. Jimmy is advising Alie about how to persuade the contractors (referred to as *they* in turn 3) to move the site.

Example 4

1. <Jimmy> Can you investigate this one [pointing with pencil at diagram] and then we propose to put it back here because it difficult to do it up there? (3)
2. <Alie> I I’ll ask ... I don’t know if it can be [laughing] if (they can agree) –
3. <Jimmy> no but you can find a story why we change it
4. <Alie> Hmm
5. <Jimmy> and not argue (2)
6. <Alie> I I attempted to ask him the last time...he told me we’ve already agreed on the on this ... relocation ... so they ... they- he don’t wannadiscuss it because we already agreed on the relocation...so [laughs]
7. <Jimmy> [exhales] I think- (something and Ito) knows about this?
8. <Alie> I think so...or maybe we have to call in it ... call him in ... you know to just discuss this
9. <Jimmy> okay err
10. <Alie> because frankly speaking
11. <Jimmy> Mm hmm
12. <Alie> moving it up here is not to our advantage (1) unless if... we’ve agreed...it definitely is going to change
13. <Jimmy> no I think from now on
14. <Alie> to come to this same level
15. <Jimmy> the design department and construction department must have co-... close coordination

16. <Alie> Yeah yeah...yeah
17. <Jimmy> Because...the the the the site condition ... err... to which the engine- ... your department
18. <Alie> Hmm
19. <Jimmy> [indecipherable]
20. <Alie> exactly
21. <Jimmy> so I maybe ... err ... um ... you should go there from time to time
22. <Alie> yah
23. <Jimmy> maybe once a week or something you need
24. <Alie> yah
25. <Jimmy> to get familiar to
26. <Alie> yah I see
27. <Jimmy> there's ongoing changes yeah?
28. <Alie> Yah
29. <Jimmy> and think ... err err err more advanced
30. <Alie> yah
31. <Jimmy> don't think of just now

As noted above, separating levels of discourses and practices is not a straightforward task, but the discourse (capital D 'Discourse' in Gee) here is arguably 'being an engineer'. In terms of practices, we could say that 'performing as an effective engineer' is the most relevant social practice in this meeting, 'advising' being the most pertinent professional practice (the whole meeting is concerned with advising). The act of advising in this extract is broken into two parts: turns 1–14 concern the specific issue of the particular site, whereas from turn 15 onwards Jimmy talks in more general terms about the need for better interdepartmental communication and for more active checking of progress by Alie. With the second piece of advice a far higher degree of hedging and indirect language is apparent (for instance, in turn 21 Jimmy says *maybe, er*, pauses and uses the idiom *from time to time*), whereas in the first Jimmy is far more abrupt (turns 3 and 5). One reason for the change in language may be the perceived face threat of Jimmy's advice: the second proposed action is a far greater imposition than the first. It is also interesting that, in the second part, Jimmy's syntax becomes noticeably more anomalous, which may be caused by the attention he is paying to achieving greater interpersonal sensitivity.

There are several discursive practices evident here that are found in meetings in CANBEC, such as suggesting, evaluating, clarifying and emphasizing, invoked through language items pinpointed in Handford (2010a). For instance there are several deontic modal verbs, used to suggest and recommend (*can* in turns 1 and 3, *must* in turn 15, *should* in turn 21 and *need to* in turn 23). According to Handford (2010a), deontic modals are a way speakers negotiate power, and we see the same here; the strongest modal form *must* is used to recommend changes at the organizational level, but when Jimmy is advising Alie the person, the modal forms are softer (*can*, *should*, *need to*). Idiomatic and metaphorical language (Handford and Koester, 2010) is also evident, for example the idioms *call him in*, *frankly speaking*, *to our advantage*, *from now on*, and the metaphor (*find a story* (meaning to create an untrue reason for the change) and *think...more advanced*. As in other workplace encounters, metaphors and idioms are largely used to evaluate indirectly and mark the speaker's stance (see Koester, 2006; Handford and Koester, 2010).

Apart from deontic modal verbs, indirect language and metaphors and idioms, there are other items that are frequently used in business meetings, such as *if*, *I don't know if* and *I think*. Place deictics, however, such as *this one*, *back here* and *up there* in turn 1, are not statistically

significant in business meetings, but have been shown to be very common in such construction-engineering interactions (Handford and Matous, 2010). In this meeting the speakers are constantly referring to the drawing in front of them to invoke the discursive practice of clarifying the position.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined two contrasting approaches to the analysis of genre. Work by Koester (2006) and Müller (2006) strongly prioritizes the communicative purpose in defining the genre, for instance decision-making, which is seen as shaping the structure and lexico-grammatical characteristics of the genre. Handford (2010a), on the other hand demonstrates how certain genres, for instance business meetings, can have recurrent stages that tend to feature repeated discursive practices. While both approaches use spoken corpora and have helped to unearth the relationship between lexico-grammar and context, they diverge in terms of the relative primacy accorded to communicative purpose, on the one hand, and the recognizability and recurrence of stages, on the other, in identifying a genre. Also, whereas Koester draws on work in interactional sociolinguistics, Handford's approach is influenced by certain 'critical' scholars, such as Gee and Bhatia. Nevertheless, we do not think that the two approaches to spoken genres are mutually exclusive: genre provides considerable interpretative depth, and it is more a case of deciding which generic approach will better prize open the particular data at hand, than a case of stating, a priori, that one approach is more plausible or fruitful than the other. Indeed, Handford (2010a) states that the notions of discursive practices and certain of Gumperz's discourse strategies do overlap, and discursive practices may function as contextualization cues for the participants, signalling and negotiating the genre they are performing. Professional discourse is goal-driven, with speakers using language and genres to achieve these goals, and if a genre has clear stages then these should be described. As with other studies of genre, the challenge is how best to account for the dynamic and the recurrent in the unfolding context, and with spoken discourse that challenge is both more difficult and (we believe) more exciting.

One of the advantages of working with corpora when analysing genre is that it is possible to notice patterns that would be hidden from purely qualitative approaches. For example, Koester (2006) found that deontic modal forms are used with the same relative frequency across the ABOT, CANBEC and BNC spoken business sub-corpus. For instance, *need to* is far more frequent than *must*, which is best explained through reference to face issues. It is also worth briefly drawing attention to the language status of the speakers in the engineering extract. The use of clusters and metaphors/idioms is generally associated with L1 users of English, and yet in example 4 we see two L2 speakers using them successfully to index contextually appropriate discursive practices. Findings such as these suggest that we need more corpus-based studies in order better to understand expert users in different international English contexts and with different first languages (Firth, 2009).

In the future, more studies that explore the way genres change over time would be of great benefit, as would more studies on the inter-discursive nature of many newly formed genres (see Candlin and Maley, 1997 for work on mediation). Also, more research on intertextuality in and across genres would further our understanding of meaning-making. Multimodal research can show the importance of paralinguistic features in particular genres and can enable us to widen our understanding of interactional discourse: so much research on spoken communication is dependent on the written transcript, which inevitably means that important 'cues' (Gumperz, 1992) are missed during analysis. Finally, analysis of spoken professional genres in languages other than English (e.g. Parodi, 2010), would be of obvious benefit.

Transcription conventions

- ... noticeable pause or break of less than 1 second within a turn
- sound abruptly cut off, e.g. false start
- italics* emphatic stress
- speaker's turn continues without interruption
- // words between slashes show uncertain transcription
- /?/ indicates inaudible utterances
- [] words in these brackets indicate non-linguistic information, e.g. pauses of 1 second or longer (the number of seconds is indicated), speakers' gestures or actions
- () parentheses around tone units spoken with 'sotto voce' (under one's breath)

Additional conventions for extract x, 'deciphering handwriting'

- , slightly rising in intonation at end of tone unit
- ? high rising intonation at end of tone unit
- . falling intonation at end of tone unit
- : colon following vowel indicates elongated vowel sound
- :: extra colon indicates longer elongation
- ↑ a step up in pitch
- ↓ a shift down in pitch
- // words between slashes show uncertain transcription
- | overlapping or simultaneous speech

Further reading

Bhatia, V. K. (2004) *Worlds of Written Discourse*. London: Continuum.

Although this book is concerned with the analysis of written professional discourse, it is highly relevant to the analysis of spoken professional discourse.

Handford, M. (2010a). *The Language of Business Meetings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

As discussed above, this book analyses a corpus of over 60 complete business meetings (CANBEC), and chapter 3 explicitly discusses the genre of the business meeting.

Koester, A. (2006) *Investigating Workplace Discourse*. Routledge: London.

This book describes and analyses 66 workplace conversations comprising the corpus of American and British Office Talk (ABOT) and compares a range of linguistic features across 11 spoken genres.

Koester, A. (2010). *Workplace Discourse*. London: Continuum.

This book provides an overview of and discussion of selected topics in workplace discourse, and includes a chapter (Chapter 2) on workplace genres, both written and spoken.

Notes

- 1 The British equivalent corpus is BASE, which contains video data, and both corpora are freely available online.
- 2 Lexical density refers to the proportion of lexical words (nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives) compared to grammatical words (articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs etc.). Texts with a high proportion of lexical words have a high lexical density.
- 3 A Discourse is 'composed of ways of talking, listening, reading, writing, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects, in particular settings and at specific times, so as to display or recognize a particular social identity' (Gee *et al.*, 1996: 10).

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