FLOWCHART REPRESENTATIONS OF GENRE IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

Decision making has long been a concern of social psychologists (e.g., Morley and Stephenson 1977). More recently, it has become a focus of communication research (Jackson and Jacobs 1981; Murray 1987). Vociferous calls are being made for more detailed micro analytical analysis. (See Poole et al. 1982, 85.) This paper explores a new approach. It displays the linguistic detail of a professionally grounded decision making process (Miller 1984; Yates and Orlikowski 1992) and looks to put these within a genre perspective (Swales 1990; Lemke 1991; Wheatley 1994a). Genre analysis involves a dynamic approach to activity analysis in order to capture the way events can and do unfold in real world situations (Martin 1984, 85; Hasan 1984, 85; Ventola 1987). This dynamic aspect of genre analysis is foregrounded in this article by flowchart reconstructions to capture the situated logics of the way events unfold.

Discourse analysts are not alone in their belief that the nature of social reality is to be found in the way its activities are constructed (Garfinkel 1964). But whereas conversation analysts (see Drew and Heritage 1992) focus on participant resources at a local level, discourse analysts focus on generic features of types of activity. Their aim is to achieve a level of generalisability and transferability in their analysis, albeit at the expense of some minute local detail. Theoretical justification for such an approach, that is not 100 per cent participant oriented, as are CA approaches to professional communication, comes from the work of Anthony Giddens, whose ***Structuration Theory*** (Giddens 1979) is built on the notion that much human action occurs semi-automatically and not with full consciousness or orientation therefore

to the mechanics of the interaction. If these mechanisms are only semi-conscious then it is pointless depending on "demonstrable participant orientation" (Drew and Heritage 1992) for our understanding of the typical ways in which regularly occurring types of event take place. The analyst is allowed back on centre stage to trace the patterning within the activity, whether participants orient to that pattern or not. Such an approach is presented below. So, this article demonstra-tes a way of modelling professional communication, one that highlights generic characteristics that are key to the unfolding social activity that is being constructed. The analysis here identifies the key choices that are open to participants, and the effect of their decisions on the way the rest of the interaction can unfold.

The data is public relations talk. It is taken from sets of meetings where the overall purpose was to design documentation. The type of document being produced was a brochure, a document that will promote the client company in its potential markets.

Essentially, document design is a decision making process. There are stages where decisions are made individually — inside people's heads and these I have no access to. I am concerned with decisions taken by groups, linguistically enacted by at least two people and thus constructing the collaborative parts of the design process.

The Process of Document Design

The Data

The data under consideration are referred to simply as Tape A and Tape B, and are presented in the Appendix.

Tape A involves two participants; a professional consultant, working for a private PR agency (the "pro"), and a client who is a process engineer with a large textiles and engineering company. The stage of proceedings they are at I call "draft checking." The pro has produced a near final draft text, which has now been checked — largely but not solely by this client. The extract is from a meeting to determine the corrections that are required. This is an interactive decision making process in that all changes are negotiated, not dictated. It is also a late stage activity in that once these changes are agreed there will be a final brochure text available for printing.

Tape B has three participants. A public affairs officer employed by the University of Birmingham, a client, the industrial liaison officer of that university, and an agency designer. I call this meeting a briefing, as did the public affairs officer. The purpose is to give the designer enough information about what Birmingham wants in its brochure to enable the designer then to produce some design sketches of the various spreads for the approval of the team. This meeting is at an earlier stage in the document design process than Tape A. It also indicates a different way of dividing the job up. In Tape A, the designer is not involved until at least a near correct draft has been worked out. In Tape B, Birmingham involves the designer from an early stage. Another difference in the structure of the group is that in Tape B both pro and client work for the same organisation.

Decision Making

Taking the briefing (Tape B) first, the role of decision making is **ancillary**. It would be possible to have a briefing with no decision making at all.

A basic pattern of enactment for a successful briefing might be:

[open] - PRO INForm — DESIGNER ACKnowledge - [close]
+/- designer clarification sequences
+/- designer elicitation sequences

The point being that the elements in capitals in the sequence **must** occur. It is a fundamental part of genre analysis (Hasan 1984; 1985; Martin 1985) to recognise and separate optional and obligatory elements of social processes. The other elements are optional, dependent on contingent local issues.

In this ideal model there is no need for a decision making element at all. However, the Birmingham public affairs officer used the Tape B meeting to acquaint the client with the designer and also to hear the client's first comments on his, the pro's, first draft of the text. This led to a more complicated briefing discourse structure:

open - || cl - pro DM ||— pro INF — designer ACK - close

The decision making is **prior** to the briefing, largely inseparable from it, but present only due to the local organisation of this meeting, as described above.

In Tape A, however, the decision making is an **integral** element. This meeting exists largely for the purpose of returning a corrected draft of the brochure to the pro so she can go away and write an improved one.

A basic pattern for this social interaction is as follows:

DRAFT CHECK
[open] - cl [neg ev] + DP ——— pro ACCept - [close]

Between the opening and closure there is a recurrent pattern of decision making interaction. There are also chat phases (Lampi 1986) and side issues but these have been left off this basic model of a draft check.

Clearly there are two distinct types of professional interaction going on here — with different goals, different ways of unfolding and which are constituted by different elements. Both meetings contain a decision making element and the pattern of decision making is relatively stable across in each meeting. The elements that make up a decision making sequence, in both Tape A and Tape B, and in other document design activities such as presentations (Wheatley 1994b), can be illustrated by a system network like this:

rej —— alt DP
[neg ev] — DP
acc ————close/ reopen
ack —— drop or reopen

Decision Making in the Data

Both the sequences below, in the appendix, fit this model of decision making. In Tape A, the client opens with a negative evaluation ("neg ev") of a specific part of the last draft. This occasions a decision proposal from the pro which is rejected by the client. The pro then makes an alternative DP, again rejected by the client. The sequence only comes to a close when client produces a term acceptable to him and pro accepts that.

Tape B is an even more straight forward example with the sequence of talk opening with a proposal from the client to change the ordering. It meets with no objection.

The pro agrees, no comment is necessary from the designer, and the decision is made.

The model above captures regularities in the decision making process across contexts. There are, however, also **differences** in decision making between my two pieces of data that are, I think, not best accounted for by this system network. It shows the same elements occurring in the same kinds of order. Of course, these elements are realised differently according to context. There are differences, for example, in degrees of interactivity, of preparation for a decision proposal, of specificity and certainty with which these proposals are expressed. All these features mark and create the fine tuning of the context of situation but they do not alter the basic pattern of group decision making. An approach is needed that captures differences in the structural elements of the interaction rather than just emphasising similarities.

Discourse Genres and Social Genres

Before discussing that approach, I want first to introduce a distinction between **social interaction** genres — a presentation or, here, a draft check and a briefing — and **discourse** genres — such as narrative, exposition or more specifically in spoken business contexts, decision making. This is a distinction that is clarified in the work of Virtanen (1992). Discourse genres are defined and recognisable by text features alone. Social interaction genres are defined in terms of the way social action unfolds.

To clarify, alongside the discourse of decision making there is another kind of genre at work in the examples I have been discussing — a genre of social interaction. Discourse genres and social interaction genres can overlap, but the overlap is unidirectional. There are narratives and there are detective stories or street stories. The latter two are socially situated activities that both make use of the discourse genre of narrative. Similarly, there is decision making and then there is draft checking and briefing. The latter two are socially situated, professional activities, both of which can make use of the discourse genre of decision making. It seems to me that these two genre types are separable — in that for example, socially situated genres can make use of more than one discourse genre as part of the enactment process. A business presentation consists of at least presentation elements and decision making elements, and as we have seen here, briefing consists of an optional decision making element and an inform — acknowledge cycle. A discourse genre, on the other hand, cannot be said to consist of a number of socially situated genres. A narrative cannot be said to consist of a detective story and something else. In other words the two genre types do not seem entirely interchangeable as they refer to concepts of a different nature, of a different size and with only one direction of fit. This distinction between social interaction genres and discourse genres is made much of in the work of Virtanen (1992) and Lemke (passim), but rather underplayed by the text linguists of the systemic functional school, Ventola, Martin and Hasan. Text genres are those such as narrative or exposition. They are real in terms of the type of text that constructs them. Social interaction genres on the other hand are not simply textual representations of ways of doing things, ways of constructing a social activity, they are themselves the means of undertaking the activity.

To summarise; the interactional stages of document design that I have data for, and that I am calling social genres, are **briefings**, **presentations** and **draft checks**. These each occupy a different stage in the document design process and they have different ways of unfolding. A feature common to both of them is the discourse genre of **decision making**.

Discourse genres and social interaction genres are clearly related and overlap. The professional communication (social) interaction genres here are draft review and briefing, and both make use of the discourse genre of decision making, As indicated above, they make use of more than one discourse genre, but discourse genres cannot be shown to make use of more than one social interaction genre.

Social Genres and Flowcharts

What I want to look at now is, how to capture the way these different social interaction genres unfold. I am using flowchart reconstructions to show what it is that the participants are doing when they are involved in draft checking or a briefing; to show what choices they are making and from what range of options. Flowcharts represent these activities as processes that unfold according to the purpose, and implicit logics, of the interaction. They help to situate decision making in a specific social context, and are particularly useful when dealing with social interaction genres where the focus is not purely textual (representational) but is interactional.

In a draft check or a briefing, each sequence that opens, opens for a limited number of purposes. This is not conversation — there is a far more limited range of options open to the participants once they make the first choice — which is to stay largely within the confines of this social activity. (The presence of chat phases and jokes in the data indicate that there is a tendency, from time to time, to step outside the genre constraints of the particular professional activity and to have a chat and a laugh — to do interpersonal work of some kind. We might think of this as embedded social activity, with its own limited range of acceptable options). Within the work activity of draft checking, decision making is constrained by the nature of the job to be done — by draft checking in general and by the local contingencies of any one particular instance of draft checking. The patterns we can see in the discourse are allowable routes through the genre structure of decision making. The particular routes taken are constrained by the kind of work the decision making is a part of, and reveal both the social process and the instance's own specific characteristics.

A decision making network need not specify which participant fulfills which element. The flowchart for the work of draft checking, by contextualising the decision making necessarily has to indicate the likely participant roles in the interaction. A decision making network need not show the social purpose of a language choice. A flowchart, however, concentrates on what it is that needs to be achieved by the talk.

Flowchart Representation

Most sequences in the draft check (Tape A) open with some talk from the client — it is he, after all, who has read the draft and marked the text over which he and the pro are poring. The choices then open to the client appear to run as follows.

CLIENT OPTIONS Draft Check (Tape A)

1. Do you have any negative comments to make about the text at this point? If NO go to 2, if YES proceed to 1A

[*This comes first because it will occur first if chosen. It is the most common initial element in Tape A*.]

1A) Will it help to read the offending text as you go?

[*The most common choice is to read it*] Then, whether read or not;

1B) Make your Negative Evaluation.

[*This can be done in a number of ways - and the way chosen will reflect characteristics of the group and the issue at hand.*]

1C) Does this evaluation need some support to carry weight or is it OK as it is? If OK go to D; if not OK, add support = give a reason for making the NE

[*This again is likely to depend less on generic features and more on local group qualities, such as how familiar the pro is with the client's reason for the negative evaluation*].

1D) Now is the time to make a decision proposal [DP]. If you have one ready make it now,

OR

1E) If you don't make a DP it is likely that the pro will.

This last may well be a feature of this group's way of working. In less collaborative situations the pro might just wait for a decision to come. In more hostile situations the client DP might well be faced with rejects and self supports from the pro rather than, as here, the more common "accept."

As to these data, at this point (1D or 1E) there is no other real choice — other than to do repair work such as clarificatory exchanges.

2. Do you have a decision proposal [DP] to make regarding the text - especially regarding new input or reordering?

[*This can be the only other reason for the opening in the Tape A draft check*.]

If the client has neither negative comments to make about the text, nor has a decision proposal to make, the participants would have to wonder what was the point of the meeting. Client's initiation of decision making sequences in order to improve the draft are an essential element of this kind of social interaction. In their absence, we would to conclude that some other form of social activity is being produced.

If yes to 2, go to 2A

2A Make a DP as opener.

3. Does the DP need elaboration to be accepted? If you think so - then

3A Elaborate.

[As the client is meant to be proposing changes to pro's text, and she is a professional writer it must be a norm - a little negative face saving (Brown and Levinson 1987) - to give a reason for interfering with her space]

The only non conformance in the data is on a very non specific decision proposal sequence. Following the activity which this flowchart maps, it is probably pro's turn to talk. At its easiest, this DP can be followed by a client accept.

The reasons for making one choice of discourse patterning over another follow from the contextualising of the decision making as part of a socially situated activity, positioning it as part of a job of work being done, which at one and the same time has structure — generic features — and also variable characteristics that are never exactly reproduced each time the job is enacted. Both kinds of features become visible by working with both kinds of generic model — the system network for decision making (the discourse genre) and the flow chart for briefing and draft checking (the social interaction genre).

Just as in the example extract from Tape A we can capture the pattern of decision making unfolding, we can also see the range of choices that constitute the activity of

draft checking. Client does have a negative evaluation of the text - of the connotations of the term "computer staff." He does think it needs some support and so he provides a reason ("sounds like data process operators or something..."). The choices open at this point are for either of the participants to make a DP, and in this instance it is taken up by the pro. I have only presented a flow chart for the activity up to this first DP, but of course it can be done for the whole interaction.

The flowchart approach recommends itself, because it allows us to clarify not just the range of choices available in the restricted environment of a draft checking activity, but also those actually selected by participants, and the consequences of their selection for the action that can then be taken by others. It shows the limitations on choice that exist when participants are interacting within a specific social, and here, work situation.

A similar flow chart can be outlined for the briefing data. Again the stopping point for now will be the initial decision proposal.

As this is not such a clear cut interaction type as the draft check, the pro does some initial work to set up the framework of this interaction. More on this as we go through the flow chart.

PRELIMINARIES

To reach the decision making stage of the talk

0. Finish procedural work

Flowchart for Tape B The Briefing - (from client's point of view)

1 Do you have a negative evaluation of this text
if No go to 2, if Yes, either

A Make it, or in the light of the pro's procedural work keep it for another time.
If you make it:

B Does it need support? (It almost certainly does given the framework of the meeting).

C Do you have a better proposal? If so:

D Make decision proposal,
otherwise likely developments are alternative DPs from the pro or self supports by the pro.

2 Do you have a DP not on the text but on other relevant issues to this job? (e.g. what goes on the cover, how this document should link up with others being produced) If not go to 3.

A If you cannot just open with the DP, do some preparatory work to let the others know where you coming from and then:

B Make the DP. (Does the DP need more support? If not, give it!)

3. Can you see a problem connected with this work that you want the group to focus on?

If not go to 4.

If yes, state problem (This is likely to lead to some kind of DP from the pro)

4. If the answer to the above questions is currently no, then the pro should be able to brief the designer on the basis of what is currently in the spread in question.

Comment on the Flow Chart Analyses

There are a similar range of alternatives open in both meetings — indicating the similarity in the two work processes. Option 1, to initiate a negative evaluation sequence, which was the main choice made in Tape A, has been all but ruled out by the pro in Tape B. There, the pro has opened the meeting with a set of procedural decision proposals that the text should not be the centre of discussion and that the document should only be used for briefing the designer.

This is a good example of the local management of meetings effecting generic structure. What would have been one of the client's ways of doing the briefing is all but put off limits by the pro which leads to an interaction that is less similar to the draft check than it might otherwise have been. The pro does not want this meeting to take on that function as well. Time constraints, not least because of the cost of the designer's time, mean that the briefing must give the designer a generally agreed view of what the Birmingham team want in their brochure without having to hammer out the content of each page in detail first. The pro is showing control over generic features of the talk by cutting out one of the decision making routes that is most time consuming and, anyway, inessential to a briefing. So in this meeting option 1 is only available in extreme circumstances.

Option 2, to open with a decision proposal, is an open choice in both Tapes. In the draft check (Tape A) it gets made only when the client is not criticising existing text — when he wants to insert some text of his own or change the order of existing text.

In Tape B we find that it is more difficult to open a sequence with a DP, and that work is needed to build up a position from which a DP can be offered. Elsewhere (Wheatley 1994a; 1994b) I analysed the build up options using Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann and Thompson 1988 and passim). For current purposes, however, I see this variation as an option in how to realise this decision making element — and not as a change in the option itself.

Option 3, to state a problem with the existing text, is the least frequent of these options in the briefing but it is not available at all in Tape A. This arises, I think, from the staging of these work activity elements in the overall document design process. In a briefing, stating problems can be seen as a way forward. The kind of problem that is stated — not knowing what to put on the front cover or how to relate this brochure with a family of folders to follow it — are suitable problems to place before the designer at this stage, so that she can go away and on her own make decisions on which will then be put to the group in artwork presentation meetings.

Taking none of these choices, from 1-3, in a draft checking would mean that some other activity was taking place. In a briefing it would mean that the briefing proper could go ahead — an indication of the different value of decision making in the two activities.

Conclusion

Professional document design activity has been represented here in two ways. One emphasising the similarity of decision making processes across different genres of discourse, and the other focusing on and highlighting these differences which are due to variation in social activity. The mix of these two kinds of analysis, applied to professional communication practices, enables us to see more clearly, for example, how discourse structures can be variously reproduced, and how discursive roles are preconditioned. The cornerstone of this genre approach is that it does not depend on

participant awareness. Participant awareness of the structure of what is going on may well be limited and will not serve as adequate information from which to build a model of social action. This is not to recommend abandoning attention to participant perceptions and awareness, but merely to point out that it is an inadequate source of information on the structures of communication, that which participants take pretty much for granted as they enact them. What is needed is a range of working techniques that will pick up both general features of an activity type and particular features occurring due to local considerations. This should provide us with an understanding of the typical coupled with an explanation of individual variation. Such has been the aim of this paper.

Appendix

Data Details

Tape A: Draft Checking

PARTICIPANTS:	2. A public relations officer (pro) working for a private agency A client - a process engineer.
ACTIVITY	Draft checking.
STAGE	Late - near completion

Tape B: Briefing

PARTICIPANTS:	3. A public affairs officer employed by the University of Birmingham, A client - the industrial liaison officer of the university A designer employed by a private agency
ACTIVITY	A briefing
STAGE	Early

Extracts

Tape A: (Draftcheck)

Ian	(DP)	[rd] Highly trained engineering...
	neg ev	I didn't like computer staff over much
	reason	sounds like data process operators or something.
Suz	altDP	What systems staff?
Ian	neg ev	Well yeah but then we're going to end up with
	+reason	systems everywhere at this rate.
Suz	el	What else would you call them?
	alt DP	software programmers
Ian	negev	but then you get engineering staff and software program- mers then don't yer
Suz	altDP	mmm] well you don't really need to put it in at all actually. You could just have our highly trained staff... team [our highly trained teams
Ian	DP+fg	[professional staff] and then [you'll find
Suz		{inaudible}
Ian	inf	I've put that in down here as well so you'll have to have a [think about that
Suz	acc	[alright ok]

Tape B: (Briefing)

B	meta S	Now the only question I had was
	DPsugg	whether we should have facilities and equipment coming before as it were the same message you're gonna make about people.
F	DPack	Right.
B	elab	That looks as if we're saying we put our equipment first and

		our people second.
F	DP acc	Fair enough.
B	DP	Whereas I think actually the message ought to be we're as good as our people.
F	ack	Yeah
B	cont	And our equipment follows the fact that we've got good people who, therefore, attract funding and
F	DP acc	Yeah.

Glossary

neg ev	=	negative evaluation	ack	=	acknowledge
alt DP	=	alternative decision proposal	acc	=	accept
el	=	elicit	sugg	=	suggest
DP	=	Decision Proposal meta	S	=	meta statement
inf	=	inform			
fg	=	fragment			
rd	=	reading (from the draft)			

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