Genres in Action: Negotiating Genres in Practice

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Abstract

In this paper we present the initial findings of a genre based case study at a large Swedish company, with a record of early use of internal email (1982). The design of the particular email system was closely mapped to the organizational hierarchy. One of our informants kept one week of incoming email messages. We then asked questions about each message and how it related to the work of the informant, and to the organization. Based on the messages and the interviews we clustered the messages in different genres.

Most literature of genres of organizational communication has focused on the genres themselves, e.g. email messages constituting different instances of genres. We found however that many messages, rather than being instances of genres, were part of informal conversations. In these conversations, however, it was common to discuss and negotiate which genres where appropriate to use in different situations.

1. Introduction

A growing interest in using genre based approaches to analyze communicative practice in organizations has been apparent during the nineties. Some of these attempts focus on content and structure in text based representations (i.e. vocabulary used in specific genres etc.), while others are focusing more on the social processes these genres are part of.

In this paper we focus on the latter, by presenting the preliminary findings of a study intended to trace the development and changes of some genres of organizational communication in a large corporation.

The study is based on one persons (further on referred to as Bob) incoming email messages during one week. From this delimitation we followed traces leading in different directions outside the email messages. The purpose was to describe and analyze one persons electronic work practice during one week, in terms of which genres he used or were confronted with.

After analyzing the email messages, we found that genres are used and that genre is a fruitful concept for analyzing how communication enacts organization. In relation to work and organization, we found that many of the most interesting genres are related to project work in some form. We also found that many of these genres were discussed and negotiated regarding the appropriateness of their use in different situations.

Here we partly take a different direction than related research on genres of organizational communication [10, 14, 15], by not considering dialogue as a distinct genre. However, we found that dialogue or informal conversation often dealt with topics as which genre to use in certain situations. We believe that these kinds of negotiations about how to use genre in practice is important, and not particularly dealt with in earlier research.

The paper is organized as follows: First we give a short general introduction of genre analysis, followed by our view on genre definition. Then we give a brief overview of the case setting and methods used. We then present the data, i.e. the email messages and the basic genres found. After this we discuss the findings, especially the negotiations about genre usage.

2. Genre

The concept of genre is used in a number of disciplines, e.g. folklore, rhetorics, literature science, art etc., and there exists a wide range of definitions. In literary studies the concept can be traced back to Aristotle [1]. Genre analysis has been used both on texts (e.g. literature science) and speech (e.g. rhetorics). In linguistics genre is closely related to speech events (and activity types), i.e. activities that are directly governed by rules and norms for use of speech, and forms of talk [7]. Thus, genre includes both speech events and written text types, i.e. it is a classification of types of generic forms of both spoken or written discourse.

In organizational communication, genre is a recent concept, it was introduced by Yates [13] and Yates and Orlikowski [14] to be applied on typical communicative practices going on in organizations. A genre of organizational communication is a typified communicative action invoked in response to a recurrent situation [14]. It is seen as a way and a means to accomplish social actions in particular recurrent situations, i.e. with similarities in purpose, audience, form etc. The recurrent situation includes the history and nature of established practices, social relations, and
communication media within organizations. A genre is rooted in and emerges out of a social practice.

1.1. What qualifies as an established genre

There are a number of competing definitions of genre, and what actually constitutes a genre. What actually counts as a single genre, and what actually determines an established genre is not clear-cut, and there are some controversies in the genre literature.

Miller [9] defines genre as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations”. Swales [12] emphasizes the role of communicative purpose, i.e. a collection of communicative events becoming a genre due to a shared set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the discourse community owning the genre. A discourse community is a group of people linked together by occupation, working premises, special interests etc., with some set of shared knowledge, possessions and behavior.

Administrative correspondence do not represent a set of shared purposes, and thus it does not constitute a genre. Swales rather views correspondence as a supra-generic assembly of discourse. Within administrative correspondence there are several established genres, e.g. the good news letter and the bad news letter, genres that are formal responses to applications. One might argue that these would be one single genre: response to applications, but Swales argues that because the rationale is different, a separate genre is required for each. It is also not uncommon with genres that have sets of communicative purposes (primary purposes, secondary purposes).

Another important source is the discourse community’s nomenclature, i.e. Swales argues that the active community members give genre names to classes of communicative events they recognize as recurrent rhetorical actions. Many of these names incorporate the communicative purpose with different precision, e.g. introductory lecture, survey article, grant application, course description etc. Others may rather indicate occasion than purpose, e.g. faculty meeting, festschrift etc. On the other hand, many genre names are rather institutional labels than descriptive ones. Then there may be genre names without any genres attached to them, as well as genres without names.

Yates and Orlikowski [14] discuss levels of abstraction, and draw on Millers [9] suggestion that genre may be defined at different levels in different cultures in different times, depending on how we view the recurrence of rhetorical situations. The business letter may then be a genre at one point in time, and at another time be more general and rather a kind of supra-generic assembly of discourse in the sense that is discussed by Swales [12]. Yates and Orlikowski [14], propose the notion of sub-genres, e.g. the positive recommendation letter would be a sub-genre of the recommendation letter (cf. Swales definition of the good-news and bad-news letter as separate genres).

Bhatia [4] follows Swales in viewing communicative purpose as the main criteria for categorizing genres. A major change in communicative purpose will give us a different genre, while a minor change or modification would help us to identify sub-genres. Using communicative purpose as the main criteria for genre classification may however lead to very broad classes. Bhatia regards sales promotional letters and job application letters as belonging to the same genre, the promotional genre. This is due to the similar purpose of these letters, i.e. persuasive, both promotional letters and job applications are aiming to elicit a specific response from its readers (to buy the products or to call the applicant for an interview). If we adopt a genre perspective, Bhatia [4] argues, “we cannot but view them as instances of the same genre”.

However, sales promotion letters and job application letters are two well established names of different types of letters in the discourse communities where they are used [11]. Skulstad argues that Bhatia mistakenly equates communicative purpose with the linguistic notion of communicative function. To take a to broad view on genre often results in equating a socially recognized communicative purpose with communicative function, which leads the thoughts to speech act theory and its limitations [8].

1.2. What counts as a genre in this study?

Genre analysis is not primarily an abstract categorization exercise, but closely tied to the situated activities in the community using them. It is what the (at least the most skilled) community members recognize as genres, that counts. Genre is rooted in practice – work practice, communicative practice, managerial practice etc. In this sense genres are inherently dynamic rhetorical structures, in relation to their use [2].

We also believe that there is a difference in the kind of generic genres that are widely recognized as, e.g., the sales promotion letter or the job application letter, and the more local (or localized) genres tied to a specific activity, task or event in an organization.

We do not view informal conversation as a genre. Orlikowski and Yates [10] views dialogue as a specific genre in their study of mail messages from a distributed project. They define the dialogue genre as “a form of written interaction modeled on oral dialogue”. The dialogue has a specific structural feature in that previous messages in the dialogue is embedded, so that the whole discourse is preserved in each message. We found similar types of assembled messages in our data which we called conversations.

There are several reasons why we do not view conversation (or dialogue) as a genre. Dialogues like these do not have a shared communicative purpose. Rather they constitutes a specific kind of assembled discourse as a result of features in the email medium. It is also
important to make a difference between a communicative function and a shared purpose. We follow Swales [12] view that not all communicative events are considered instances of genre, especially not casual conversation as it is defined by Levinson:

...two or more participants freely alternate in speaking, which generally occurs outside specific institutional settings like religious services, law courses, classroom and the like. [7]

In contrast to conversation in institutional settings [6], casual conversation is too fundamental to be usefully considered as a genre. The conversations we found in our material had the informal casual form implicated by Levinson’s definition of conversation. However, we found that these informal conversations often were referring to named genres, in discussing and negotiating on which genre that is appropriate to use in different situations.

3. Method

The study was conducted in a large Swedish IT-company (with approximately 2000 employees). The company is part of a group of companies with manufacturing as their core business. The IT-company serves the company group with computer technology, and acts as internal consultants. Their mission ranges from maintenance of old systems to advanced R&D and technology watch. Employees are involved in a diversity of tasks, from consulting to more research like tasks, e.g. investigating new technologies and software that could be interesting to the company, and writing reports about these. The work is almost purely project oriented. The sharing and dissemination of information and knowledge related to projects are by many of the people we interviewed held as the most important issue, but also one of the largest problems and bottlenecks.

The study reported in this paper is part of a larger study, where we are investigating several parts of the company group. In the project as a whole we look at three different situations.

We asked one of the employees at the IT-company, working in the group for document and web-technology to save his incoming email messages for one week. The total amount of separate email messages was 66. One email message can, however, contain several messages since in the email system Memo™ one and the same email can be sent back and forth, adding on the lines of a reply. This function of saving the old text (indented or marked in some way) in a reply message is common in many email systems, but in Memo they are also represented physically as one message in the in box. This means that replying does not add messages as long as the conversation is internal in the company (if a message is replied by someone outside the company it becomes a new email in the mail box). This functionality is due to the inherent limitation (due to expensive disk space at the time) that the in box only can contain 420 messages. These messages constitute a whole dialogue with the most recent message on top. In these cases we have counted each contribution to the dialogue as one message. Thus, of the 66 messages we collected, several belong to such dialogues.

We then made a full day, in-depth interview with the employee were we discussed each email message in order to get a better understanding of how the communication was related to contexts of work. E.g., we asked questions about how a specific email was related to his work? If the same information is available on the intranet? If not should it be? Which kind of distribution list was used? Could he also have used this distribution list? etc.

After getting the informant’s response on his incoming email we set out to make a genre analysis of the messages. We used the principles described earlier to decide what would really count as a genre.

This analysis also included genres referred to in the messages, since it showed that many messages whether they were in themselves informal, they were referring to genres and how they should be used in different situations.

66 emails are not a big sample compared to other similar studies where emails are used to analyze organizational communication (see for example Yates et al.). But our aim was to describe and analyze a persons electronic work practice during one week. We were interested in what kind of genres the person used when communicating, and how he used them in the electronic medium.

The delimitation of the study was one week and one person. From this delimitation we followed tracks leading in different directions outside the delimitation, e.g. email messages referring to other genres.

One week of email messages seemed at this stage of investigation as a suitable amount of data. We did not aim for quantitatively representative data for the person, or for the division where he works or the company as a whole. Rather we wanted a starting point. The data is qualitatively representative in the sense that it reflects an electronic work practice in one employee’s workweek.
4. Genres in action

Before we discuss the messages, we give a background to the mail system used in the organization. Then we present the external messages, followed by the internal ones.

4.1. The Memo-system

The introduction of internal email in the late seventies and early eighties led to a major shift in the company’s organization of internal communication. In the late seventies, the precursor to the email system Memo™, was developed as a tool for the system administrator to communicate with terminal users. From this basic and practical function an email system was developed, that in a few years became a success, both internally, and externally as a commercial product. Note the difference between the email application Memo™, the messages sent within the system that of course were called memos, and the genre memo as described by Yates [13].

The early version of the Memo™ system proved to be a good tool for internal communication and information, and it was decided that it should be developed for large-scale use within and between the different subsidiaries of the company. The strategy to increase the number of users was to let key-persons in management be equipped with a terminal and encouraged to use Memo for correspondence with other people. The vice president of the IT-company at the time being, was the leading user and his staff became the first generation of Memo users in the company group.

In a research report from 1983 [5] Memo™ was described as a tool that could complement, or even replace several kinds of established internal communication devices. The user did not have to worry about a busy phone-line, no answer or the wrong person answering. Internal post could be replaced by Memo™ since the time of delivery was shortened and printed copies were available if needed. The content of the messages was written directly at a terminal like a memorandum and sent as a telex. Small paper notes could be replaced by messages to Memo™ with feedback to the writer. A form could filled in and returned without delay. The sender could demand an answer to a message. One message could be sent to many recipients at the same time.

The rise of the Memo-system coincided with a management philosophy aimed at information push. There were two characteristics of the architecture of Memo that especially promoted this philosophy, and that had a large impact on the usage of the Memo-system as well as the emerging information culture in the organization:

- The Memosystem had basic facilities by which a systems administrator could structure the users. The common way to do this was to let the structure of users follow the organizational structure. Thus, the distribution lists were directly mapped on the organization chart. In this hierarchical fashion it was possible for managers to distribute information top down on a regular basis with ranging over the whole organization, a division, a department etc.

- The ordinary user could at most send a message to the unit he/she was working on, but not to the whole organization, or the whole department. In such a case the user had to send the message to the information department which decided if it was interesting enough to be forwarded to a larger audience.

- Since an employee belonged to one department, and one organizational unit etc., he could only be on one distribution list. There could not be any alternative public distribution lists along with the organizational ones.

- This, suited the organizational context well, since, besides peer-to-peer email, Memo was heavily used for top down information from management. Today this information is sent from the specific information department. The type of information sent this way was, and is, mainly different kinds of organizational information, e.g. economic updates, presentation of new managerial staff, new policies, information on reorganizations etc., along with more local information. In an investigation 1983 (Carnbäck et al., 1983) the most common use of Memo was short question or answer (42 %) followed by summons or reservations for meetings (11 %), circular letters and general information (13 %). Managers were the most frequent senders of messages.

- The other important facility in Memo was that you could see if a message was read or not (but not if it was understood or what the reactions was, as one manager did comment). Thus, the information was distributed downwards, and it was possible to control if the employees had read it. Another incentive to read your email was the upper limit of 420 messages in the mailbox. This restriction was originally due to the fact that disk space was expensive in the early eighties, but the restriction is still valid. This causes people to clean their mailboxes before they go on holiday or a business trip.

Most of these characteristics are still valid for Memo.

4.2. External messages

Of the 66 mail messages 31 was external. Many of these was what we will refer to as conversation, i.e. rather informal dialog that is not codified as genres. Newsletters,
sales promotion letters and calls (mainly conference calls) were the most common external mail message genres. 13 messages were informal conversation with an external source.

**Newsletters**

Newsletters are regular announcements sent from outside the organization with information about products, specific kinds of technology and other news etc. Newsletters could be sent by a vendor, but they differ from normal sales promotion letters in that they are less commercial to their form. To get a newsletter, you have to subscribe to it. Among our messages we found 10 messages of this kind. They are of two types. The first type is newsletters from a vendor containing mainly product information of that vendor, but also sometimes other related information about methods and practical things. Examples of this are message nr 21, a newsletters from a vendor of a web tool tested by the company, and messages nr 38 and 46 newsletters from two different Internet book shops. The other type is based on a broker which gathers information about certain topics and then distributes it to the subscribers. In some cases this is done based on interest profiles so that each subscriber only gets information matching his/her personal interest profile. Examples are message 10, the Search engine report, which is an email companion to the web based service Search engine watch. This is a newsletter dedicated to products, technology, literature, research etc. related to search engines. Other examples are messages 12, 23, and 56, the Gartner customized newsletter. Whenever there is new information matching a subscribers interest profile, the information (or urls linking to the information) is sent to the subscriber.

- **Purpose:** Update information on specific techniques, products or events;
- **Structure:** Often contains the elements: index/contents, sponsors message or editors comments, and then paragraphs matching the content list. The language used is quite neutral.

The newsletters we saw examples of were all directly related to the work of our informant, and to specific tasks he was assigned to.

**Sales promotion letters**

Sales promotion letters differ from newsletters in that they do not have a neutral tone, they are more or less explicitly persuading. They are unsolicited, you get them whether you want them or not. Among the messages we found three sales promotion letters, and they all fitted quite well into the analysis made by Bhatia [4] on this genre. A sales promotion letter is according to Bhatia an unsolicited letter addressed to a selected group of prospective customers in order to persuade them to buy something. To accomplish this the letter must attract the attention of the potential customers and then encourage them to engage in further communication.

- **Purpose:** To persuade someone to buy a product or service
- **Structure:** According to Bhatia [4] there are seven main elements of sales promotion letters, four of these are:
  - Establishing credentials, i.e. making the potential customer confident of the expertise and credibility of the seller;
  - Introducing the offer;
  - Offering incentives;
  - Ending politely;

Messages 20, 52 and 58 are examples of sales letters, with a structure that fits well into Bhatia’s description. Message 52 with the speculative sender id "makemoney@iwse.com" starts with the following lines to establish credentials:

*We are an IBM Business Partner, and we will pay you $25.00 to check out our company. No tricks.*

We do not go into any detail here since the sales promotion letters are out of the scope of this study. They are mainly considered as junk mail, and do not contribute to the work in the company.

**Call for participation**

Calls for participation in conferences and other kinds of professional events could be considered as a specific genre. We found three calls for participation in our messages. A call is not demanding as is the case for the different types of formal calls for participation e.g., a calling-up order for military service or participation in a court trial.

- **Purpose:** To attract people to engage in an event
- **Structure:** Usually contains the elements: Theme and type of event (course, seminar, tutorial etc.), target group, place, time, short descriptive text introducing speaker and topic, agenda, price, a form for registration;

**The Digest**

We have earlier discussed the role of conversation or dialogue, and found that it is not a genre. However, specific conversations in certain settings, with a specific goal could be considered as genres. One example of this is the different types of email conferences as discussion groups and discussion lists. These have specific goals and quite well established norms of behavior. A contribution to a discussion group or discussion list could be a separate message (eventually starting up a conversation)
or a part of an ongoing conversation. A conversation within the discussion group is then threaded so that you can follow the contributions to the discussion in a sequence.

A genre relating to the discussion group/discussion list is the digest. A digest is a merging of all or the best contributions to a discussion group or a discussion list in a specific time frame. It serves the purpose to inform newcomers to the discussion group on what has been going on, and to summarize for others what has been discussed in the particular topic of the group. Messages nr 8 and 31 are examples of a moderated digest, the I-search digest, a discussion list on understanding Internet search technology.

- Purpose: To share professional information or knowledge;
- Structure: Name of the list, name of the moderator (if any), table of contents, each of the separate messages in sequence;

4.3 Internal messages

The main genre categories represented by the internal email messages in our data, were not so many. We found rather obvious genres like the internal job proposal, the organizational announcement, the call for internal events (like seminars, courses etc.). We also found more problematic ones, e.g. messages related to meetings, like call for meeting and minutes from meetings. Here we think of the meeting as a genre in itself (or several specific genres, e.g. the board meeting, the project meeting, the unit meeting), but related to the meeting is a system of genres like oral presentation, minutes, etc. We will not address these as such here, but some of the genres we discuss will relate to different sorts of meetings.

The largest part of the messages could be considered as informal conversation that we do not consider as a genre. An interesting finding was that quite many of the internal informal conversations were discussing or negotiating which genres to use in particular situations. We call these messages/dialogues for conversations referring to a genre. We will discuss these later, but we will shortly describe the genres referred to in these conversations.

**Internal job proposal**

The job proposal is a kind of generic genre, commonly recognized, with a specific structure. However, the job proposals that were sent as email messages internally were of a different kind than traditional job proposals, they were more of a role proposal. We saw five such proposals, all concerning project leadership. This meant that you had to be an employee to apply for these internal job proposals, although they have almost the same format as ordinary job proposals.

- Purpose: To attract applications for jobs, mainly in projects for a limited time;
- Structure: They always contain these elements:
  - A header with a reference number followed by a short name for the responsible person, e.g. 9814-02 BOBSM if Bob Smith is the responsible person.
  - Name, phone, organizational and geographical location of "customer";
  - Mission description;
  - Appointment category: tick one or some of: systems development, communication, MIS, CLASS, or business development;
  - Mission category: tick one or some of formulating directives, pilot study, planning, realization, maintenance;
  - Range in terms of time and budget;
  - Requirements on qualifications;
  - Client/financier;

The internal job proposal (or project assignment proposal) is closely related to the project organization, its main purpose is to attract the right people to fill the open slots in a project. Strangely enough the internal job applications are not announced on the intranet.

**Call for participation**

Internally there are also calls for participation, mainly regarding internal seminars, internal courses. These calls have almost the same status as external calls, i.e. they are not demanding in the sense that a summon for a project meeting is.

- Purpose: to attract people to come to an (non obligatory) internal event;
- Structure: Usually contains the elements: Theme and type of event (course, seminar, tutorial etc.), target group, place, time, short descriptive text introducing speaker and topic, agenda, price, a form to be filled in for registration;

**Organizational announcement**

Organizational announcements are announcements made by people who have the authority to speak for the organization by means of their function within the organization.

- Purpose: To distribute information regarding institutional policies, procedures and other organizational information;
- Structure: Mostly quite simple: a main purpose and a set of paragraphs covering distinct pieces of information;

The most profound example of this is the internal Newsmemo, that is regularly sent out to the whole
organization by the information department (with the mail-id "informer"). The news concerns organizational changes, and different kinds of internal information. The newsmemos are also distributed on paper, placed in racks at the entrances of the company.

During the week we saw five messages that could be considered as organizational announcements. Message number 9 were describing a reorganization of the part of the IT-company in the UK.

Message nr 36 is the regular Newsmemo nr 5-98. It contains five main news. A description of the new organization, and its parts unit, department and group. Together with this is a reminder, that anyone interested in taking managerial responsibilities, should respond to a separate formatted Memo-message. The second news item is a reminder to all departments that not already are present on the intranet to create home pages. The third news item is information about the recent deal with employees to buy inexpensive home computers (PCs). A FAQ list is promoted on this topic. The fourth news is about large changes in the Memo system itself. Parts of these news is also found on the intranet.

A message (nr 55) from the central computer maintenance department about the changes in the Memo-system is another example of organizational announcements.

As already mentioned, any user could not send messages like these, distributed to the whole organization or a whole unit, if they want to do this they must send the message to informer who decides if it is important.

Project report

The full project report could take several forms. The most common form is "the technical report" which is rather direct, it focuses on the techniques investigated and does not use many references. A not so common alternative is to write the report more like a research report or a research paper, with more argumentation, and a more strict style of making references to others work. Whether a simpler technical style or a scientific style is chosen, the full project report needs to be supplemented with a project report summary.

- Purpose: To disseminate project results;
- Structure: Technical or scientific;

Project report summary

In addition to the full project report you are obliged to submit a summary according to a specific format. The summary must not exceed 2 pages.

- Purpose: To give an easy interpretable overview of project results;
- Structure (may not be altered):
  - A set of headers to be filled with specific information: Review of report (preprinted alternatives who the report should be sent to according to topic); Issuer; Bulletin title (name used in funding application); Job code; Information; Product/Service
  - Headers concerning the contents of the report:
    - Condition and background (obtained from funding application);
    - Objectives (obtained from funding application);
    - Results (have they been achieved?);
    - Training; The next step (how will the results be utilized);
    - Information (individuals who can supply more information)

Oral presentation of project report

In addition to the full project summary you are obliged to make a short oral presentation at the R&D council meeting. There are a couple of R&D-councils organized around certain topics, e.g. communications, data mining etc. Each R&D-council consists of 7 or 8 managers, and is responsible for reviewing project proposals in their area.

- Purpose: To brief the R&D council about the results from the project;
- Structure: 10-20 minutes oral presentation at the regular R&D council’s meeting;

The claim

A claim is a specific way to apply for project money. First you must to write a short project specification according to a standard claim template. The written application should be short (1-2 pages) and include the aim of the project, background, time plan, required resources and expected results. The written application is submitted to one of the internal R&D-councils.

Then at the monthly R&D-council meeting, you must give a 20 minutes oral “claim”, after which the R&D-council will take the decision whether or not to grant the claim. Thus, you know if the project is granted before leaving the meeting. A claim could range from applying for several million dollars for special equipment to the permission to use your own working hours as only resource. Since all employees are paid their salary anyway, the claim functions as a way to legitimize the use of company time for a certain project. This legitimation process is linked to the project organization.

- Purpose: To get project money and/or legitimation of a project;
- Structure: The written application should be short (1-2 pages) and include the aim of the project, background, time plan, required resources and expected results. The oral claim is limited to 20 minutes and should cover the same topics as the written part.
Table 1. The categorized messages (with headers, and translated from Swedish when applicable).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre/category</th>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>External</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conversation (not a genre)</td>
<td>4. Help I am drowning in Memos (dialogue)</td>
<td>1. Question for Infoseek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Help I'am drowning in Memos (dialogue)</td>
<td>2. Goat's eye again?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. Web servers?</td>
<td>3. Impressed!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17. CONF'98 (dialogue)</td>
<td>7. Hello!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27. CONF'98 (dialogue)</td>
<td>18. CSCW-paper</td>
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<td></td>
<td>30. CONF'98 (dialogue)</td>
<td>19. CONF-submission</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32. CONF'98 (dialogue)</td>
<td>22. Credits</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35. Dennis quits</td>
<td>24. SE Mailing list</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37. Web page</td>
<td>25. CSCW-submission</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50. Nice</td>
<td>28. CONF'98 (dialogue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53. Books</td>
<td>43. Info on interesting links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>57. Search Engine Engineering</td>
<td>51. Save mail?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64. Visit restart</td>
<td>65. Submission deadline and procedure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>66. Welcome coffee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation referring to a genre</td>
<td>6. Agent technology (dialogue)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(not a genre)</td>
<td>16. Agent technology (dialogue)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>44. R&amp;D Report</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45. PD Report mode</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>49. Agent technology (dialogue)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>54 Agent technology (dialogue)</td>
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<td>Job proposal</td>
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<td>47. 9814-05-MONAC</td>
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<td>48. 9814-03-KKN</td>
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<td>62. 9814-01-PERCY</td>
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<td>63. 9814-02-PERCY</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>26. Meeting-minutes, W14</td>
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<td>61. Reorganization info and XML</td>
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<tr>
<td>Call for participation</td>
<td>5. Rational rose course</td>
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<td>59. R&amp;D lunch seminar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>29. Monday seminar on Tuesday</td>
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<td>39. Math/Science &amp; Technology CFP</td>
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<td>60. The seminar today</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sales promotion letter</td>
<td>20. Save $30.00 on Prodigy Internet!</td>
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<td></td>
<td>52. IBM Business Partner Offers Profitable Investment, Free $ 25.00!</td>
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<td>58. Congratulations from PersonalConnections</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td>10. SE Report #17, Part 2 of 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11. SE Report #17, Part 1 of 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>12. Gartner Profile Matches</td>
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<td></td>
<td>21. WebSite Pro 2.2 upgrade now</td>
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<td>23. Gartner Profile Matches</td>
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<td>38. Internet Book Shop March Newsletter</td>
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<td>40. Market Position Newsletter – April 98</td>
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<td>42. Search Interface</td>
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<td>46. Paginova Nr 15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>56. Gartner Profile Matches</td>
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<tr>
<td>Org. announcement</td>
<td>9. The GB IT subsidiary</td>
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<td>13. Wednesday&amp;Thursday</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34. Thanks!</td>
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<td>36. Newsmemo 5-98</td>
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<td></td>
<td>41. Salary 980405</td>
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<td>55. News Memo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Digest (new genre?)</td>
<td>8. I-Search digest, #014</td>
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<td>31. I-Search digest, #015</td>
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5 Negotiating genres

When analyzing the emails and coding them in a genre-scheme we found that a lot of messages were “pure conversation” which cannot be considered to be a genre. There is neither an organizational purpose, nor a fixed form of the conversation (other than being sent by Memo or received from Memo or email). Conversation, as it is used in this article, has some resemblance to what Orlikowski & Yates [10] calls “dialog” which is defined as “a form of written interaction that is modeled on oral dialogue”.

Email resembles the dialogue genre because it is “a message responding to a previous one and including all or part of that previous message followed by a direct response to it. Such a message also had a subject line, typically picked up from the original message and occasionally modified” (ibid.). Yates and Orlikowski mean that the pattern of dialogues exhibits all the basic components of a genre. They are invoked in a recurrent situation; they have a shared social purpose and common features of form. If genre is to be defined as conversations with a goal, the goal could not be conversation in itself. The shared social purpose is the result of the conversation, that is, the goal that the activity of conversation is a part of.

An interesting form of conversation was comments, questions and dialogues that referred to genres such as the claim, the project summary, the project report.

A typical example is the conversation of which genre is going to be used for a certain purpose. A project is often followed by a project report (depending on the length of the project). If the form and purpose of the report were uncertain the project participants would ask questions to the manager in order to clarify what is needed from them in order to complete the project. The following conversation is typical:

Hi!
As a result of technical problems the test has been delayed, but I will be finished in time. My report is attached in Word-format. What counts as a final report? Should I present the results at a meeting or is the report enough?

/Bob

When the employee chose to report his project in form of the scientific report-genre the manager answered by sending him a standard pre-formatted template for PD-reports, which was embodied in the mail. The model contained detailed genre-specific instructions clarifying information, such as department number, name, phone, date, funding, background and objectives, results, next step and dissemination of information about the project. But before this the manager also instructed him in how

the genre is used in the organizational context so that he could act according to the genre-based specifications:

Hi Bob,
Thanks for a thorough and good report!
You are welcome to present your result at the next R&D council meeting, WEDNESDAY THE 29 OF APRIL, in the afternoon. (You will receive a call to this meeting later on)
But if I would also like you to do a SHORT abstract according to the report-template (MAXIMUM two pages) focusing on the results and your recommendation for how we are going to proceed. In that part of the report you refer to your technical report.
I will send you the template in a separate memo.
OK ??

Regards George

This was not saying that the scientific report was wrong, but had to be supplemented to the already established way of reporting projects.

The social significance of referring to a particular genre can be based on the importance of creating a common context of meaning in which a conversation can be developed. However this is often combined with the process of “clarification” discussed above. In the following example issues of clarification and fundraising are intertwined. As mentioned, the genre of raising funds for a project is called a claim at the department. The goal of a claim is to make the project legitimate. Small projects (one or two weeks) do not need a claim. But if a claim is considered necessary it has to be followed by a directive specifying goals (objectives of the project), resource allocation (amount of people and their roles in the project) and time schedule (specifying dates for finishing different steps and the total amount of time).

By referring to the claim, a context of common understanding of the situation was created. It is not declared in advance that a claim is the appropriate way to discuss the project as a whole, but the claim is a well-established genre at the company and thereby seen as a “natural” way to start a discussion of an idea for a new project. To illustrate the dialogue that can evolve from this understanding of the situation, the following example can be illustrative. The conversation starts with a proposal for a project about agent technology:

Hello,
I suggest that we start a FUPU about agent technology on intranets. Both 2330 and Information Highway are positive to this. The only question is how to solve the financial requirements. Stay in touch!

Regards John
Message two in the conversation develops the idea:

Hello,

It’s not the finances that is the problem, but rather the resources I believe. Bob is working with this issues and if he could get more resources we could also increase his budget.

Regards HP

Message 3 in the conversation is a comment from Bob that he’s interested to join a project on agent technology, and that his colleague Roberto also is interested. Message 4:

HP and Jane,

It seems to be a good opportunity for a project on agent technology. I am willing to join either the steering board or the working group. Jane, are you or Bob writing a first proposal for directive.

Regards John

Here is a reference to the genre directive that is a specific form for project proposals. Message 4 is a response from Bob’s group manager Jane:

Hello,

I have spoken to Bob and Roberto, they are both interested in the project. Estimated project start would be beginning of May, when their current project is finished.
Claim don’t seem to be needed, so I suggest that Dick and/or Roberto writes the directive, since they are initiated in the area.
Great that you will join!

/Jane

Jane does not believe that the use of the genre claim is necessary. Message 5 in the conversation is a response to the usage of this genre from Bob and his colleague Roberto, and a request for some clarifications to be able to write the directive:

Hello,

Writing a directive is OK, but:
Who is the client which we could clear the directive with (and who could give us a mission code)?
What is the aim of the mission, range, time plan

What do we mean with agent technology? Is it only the question of Firefly’s status within the organization or is it a broader focus?
Could we take a similar approach as the URL-minder project? Making both a pseudo scientific approach :-) and a specific evaluation of Firefly.

Regards Bob and Roberto

Bob and Roberto need some clarifications in how to use the directive genre. The next message is a response from John clarifying some of the issues raised by Bob and Roberto:

Hello,

Depending on how we formulate the mission, the information department might be the client. In that case I want the mission formulated like this:
Aim: Suggest a tool that give each employee an individually customized view of the Intranet.
Range: 2 man weeks pilot study of available products
3 man weeks pilot testing of two products
1 man week report writing, presentation and recommendation
Time plan: v. 21-22 pilot study
v. 23-24 pilot testing
v. 25-26 Finishing report

Regards John

The last message in this conversation (as far as we followed it) did clarify that a claim was necessary anyway:

Claim is needed as usual, it should have the form of a directive. This then has to be presented to the APPL-council. (Check with Peter August)

Regards HP

The example conversation shows that a project consists of a whole set, or repertoire of more or less formal genres used in different phases of a projects lifetime. First, there is the project proposal aiming for assignment of project money and/or legitimization of the project. This is surrounded with distinct rules and a set of formal genres like the claim and the directive.

Then there is the realization of the project with a set of associated genres as, e.g., the project meeting, the milestone report or status report etc.

Finally, there are the genres related to reporting on the project results and the fulfillment of project mission, e.g. the project report, the oral presentation, and the project report summary.

The conversations about genres shows that genres are not static. They are continuously negotiated and
motivated. Not all employees are confident with all genres, and must be updated and briefed by their colleagues or managers of the appropriate genres to use in different situations. Sometimes, they use the wrong ones and may eventually be corrected.

6. Conclusions and further work

In previous research of genres in organizational communication, the relation between conversation and genre has not been thoroughly discussed and analyzed, as the focus has been on communicative events constituting genres in themselves, and not conversations about genre. One of the major efforts of this study has been to analyze how genres are used in an organizational context.

After analyzing one week of email messages, we found that genres are used and that genre is a fruitful concept for analyzing how communication enacts organization. In relation to work and organization, we found that many of the most interesting genres are related to project work in some form. We also found that many of these genres were discussed and negotiated regarding the appropriateness of their use in different situations. This shows that genre is a dynamic and living phenomena. Conversation referring to a genre functioned as establishing a "context of meaning" for the participants, in which the conversation was developed and negotiated.

The results reported are preliminary findings, which we will analyze further. The next step will be to investigate how the intranet relates to work practice and to project work. We will try to follow a project on site for a longer period.

Since the focus of this paper has been on email messages we have not discussed the links to the intranet in any detail, but interestingly enough most of the email messages constituting a genre, like organizational announcements, should rather be placed on the intranet according to our informant. Distributing this information only on the intranet, requires, however, that more of an information pull culture is established.

The only messages that really would require the email medium are the conversations, and the most urgent organizational messages.

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References


