

# Structure and Action in Organisational Social Media Settings

## Genre and Speech Act Analysis Combined – Exemplified on a Case of Strategic Action

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### Abstract

*Structures in organisations to a certain extent consist of language. This becomes obvious when analysing social media. Contrary to verbal speech, computer-mediated communication is non-volatile. However, in some respects communication on social media platforms resembles face-to-face communication. This calls for close analyses of this kind of communication in relation to organisational behaviour. Based on structuration theory, and by combining genre and speech act analysis, this paper proposes a joint analytical perspective on communicative structure and action.*

*Keywords: Computer-mediated Communication, Genres, Organisational Behaviour, Social Media, Speech Acts, Structuration Theory.*

*Strukturen in Organisationen bestehen zu einem gewissen Grad auch aus sprachlichen Phänomenen. Bei der Analyse von Social Media wird dies offenkundig. Denn im Gegensatz zu verbalen Äußerungen ist computervermittelte Kommunikation nicht flüchtig. Dennoch ähnelt Letztere in mancherlei Hinsicht dem sprachlichen Austausch von Angesicht zu Angesicht. Diese Feststellung führt zu der Erfordernis, diese Art der Kommunikation auf Social Media Plattformen im Rahmen des Organisational Behaviour genauer zu untersuchen. Durch die Kombination von Genre- und Sprechaktanalyse auf Basis der Strukturationstheorie wird eine kombinatorisch-analytische Perspektive auf kommunikativen Strukturen und Handlungen vorgeschlagen.*

*Stichworte: computervermittelte Kommunikation, Genres, Organisational Behaviour, Social Media, Sprechakte, Strukturationstheorie*

# 1 Introduction

With an increasing diffusion of social media in corporate contexts, the analysis of organisational online behaviour becomes increasingly important. Rather different from older platforms of computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW), on which the principles of communication were broadly determined by the technical structure, social media is rather open in terms of use scenarios (McAfee, 2006). They can, for example, be used for information sharing and, at the same time, as a means for fostering organisational coherence. Furthermore, due to its complex setup in terms of the arrangement of computer-mediated encounters between people, social media constitutes communication environments that, more than older platforms, enable communication which resembles face-to-face encounters (Hauptmann and Steger, 2013). This paper introduces a way to systematically investigate the activities on social media platforms with respect to organisational behaviour based on communicative action.

A close focus on analogies and similarities, but also on well defined differences between the non-volatile characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on one hand and verbal speech in face-to-face encounters on the other, should help to get to the main base of organisational online behaviour. Different from the need to participate in face-to-face communication in order to investigate it, CMC research holds out the prospect to investigate everyday human behaviour in organisational settings in an ex-post manner. Notwithstanding this benefit of ex-post access to conversations, close analytical views show that situations in online conversations are complex, and access to the mere words of conversation might lead to wrong assumptions. Therefore, it is necessary to uncover the structural conditions within which communicative action takes place, as well as the motives of the actors involved.

I will introduce an online research method that combines genre and speech act analysis in order to get close to the basics of organisational online behaviour. This combination between genres and speech acts uncovers the relation between communication structures and actions. Genres, here seen as structures, are typified patterns of rhetoric activities (Miller, 1984), whereas speech acts convey individual strategic conduct (Bazerman, 1994; Giddens, 1984). Scrutinising the academic literature related to both aspect of communication, I found that the analysis of genres and rhetoric action ordinarily happens separately. This is not objectionable, because the analysis of structure is as valuable as the analysis of action, as institutional analysis on one hand and action analysis on the other, respectively (Giddens, 1979). However, with respect to single communication events, separating structure from action and vice versa may lead to misinterpretations. We may have knowledge about the conditions of action, but not about the actors' motives or vice-versa. Therefore, when looking only at the context of events or the outcome of it, we are in danger of interpreting this communication event in the wrong way.

Even written texts on corporate social media platforms show characteristics of both genres as well as speech acts, and we can analyse them in relation to each other. One big advantage of online research is that we can do this kind of analyse ex-post because, in contrast to face-to-face encounters, conversations on social media are stored in databases. But, in order to exert the analysis of communicative action events on social media platforms, first an analytical focus on the relation between genres and speech acts has to be developed. For this, I will refer to the structuration model according to Giddens (1984), with which I will introduce genres as institutions and speech acts as the enactment of genres. Exemplified on one particular communication event on the professional microblogging platform Communote, I will show that only the combination of genre and speech act analysis reveals some blind spots that would normally come along with a separation of the two methods.

Before this model development and analysis happens in Section 3, I will begin with an outline of the relevance of organisational communication in general, followed by the rising relevance of corporate social media for organisational coordination in particular. This paper closes with some implications for organisational online research in Section 4.

## 2 Computer-mediated Action in Organisations

Communication can be regarded as the main carrier of human conduct (Ortmann, 2004). Therefore, the role of organisational communication will be introduced first, followed by an analysis on how communication, action, and behaviour is related to social media.

### 2.1 Organisational Communication as Social Action

Modern organisations are characterised by ‘discursive coordination’ (Braczyk, 1997). This kind of coordination has widely been replacing with the mode *order/execution*, which was decisive for Fordist or Weberian understandings of organisations. Chester Barnard already claimed that “informal organisation is essential to formal organisations, particularly with reference to communication” (Barnard, 1938, p. 223f.), and that “the first executive function is to develop and maintain a system of communication” (Barnard, 1938, p. 226). With a rising complexity in organisational practice, Barnard’s early claims against mere Taylorism, Fordism and the bureaucracy theory have been given credit by organisation researchers who focus on communication as a mode of organisational behaviour. The complex relations between task orientation and cultivating social relations are decisive in modern organisations (Brünner, 2000; Miller, 1999). This relation calls for activities such as persuading, convincing, arguing and defending rather than the duality of ordering and executing. When speaking of ‘discursive coordination’, Braczyk holds exactly those forms of communication as being relevant.

These informal characteristics of communication call for psychological and sociological understandings of communication (Theis-Berglmair, 2003). The main characteristics of discursive coordination can be found in complex forms of communication that are embedded in social structures and executed by linguistic action (Kieser, 1998; Ortmann, 2004). According to some advocates of a radical view on organisational communication, like the CCO approach (Communicative Constitution of Organisation, see Cooren et al., 2011; Schoeneborn, 2011; Taylor and Robichaud, 2004), an organisation can be seen as composed exclusively of communication of such a kind. Omitting a discussion on this radical view, it can certainly be stated that an organisation is a social construction by its members, whose subjective theories and scripts as well as common meanings about rules, norms and procedures are (re-)structured by use of language (Kieser, 1998, p. 54). Hence, organisational structures to a large extent consist of communication and, at the same time, are changed by communication.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2000, p. 137f.) claim that “people do not use language primarily to make accurate representations of perceived objects but, rather, to accomplish things.” Language, according to Alvesson and Kärreman, is far more than a tool for making statements about facts. Rather, it is an inherent component of social beings by constituting the relations between them. This view, known as ‘linguistic turn’ (Rorty, 1967), mainly deriving from the philosophy of language by late Wittgenstein (2000), and leading to succeeding theories about the relation between social action and language (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969), allows for an extended understanding of communication as a kind of action also known as a “speech act”. Speech acts, such as instructions (to instruct), statements (to state), promises (to promise), allusions (to allude) and many others (see Ortmann, 2004, p. 64), are performative activities that, not dissimilar to activities executed by hands, “‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events” (Giddens, 1984, p. 14). Making a difference to a pre-existing state, according to Giddens, defines action as an important analytical category in the social sciences.

Speech acts are closely related to other communicative phenomena: genres. Genres can be seen as “typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations” (Miller 1984, p.159). Communication during a business meeting can be regarded as such a typified rhetorical action. This situation consists of patterns of rules and expectancies that the attendants share. The members of a business meeting, for example, usually know very well how the procedure during a meeting works. They know about the time frame, the role of an agenda, about voting processes, etc. Moreover, genres such as meetings and their subgenres (agenda, meeting minutes, etc.) are very often well defined and their procedural rules are declared. All these genres and sub-genres together constitute a frame of action that is structured in specific ways and follows specific norms of conduct (Goffman, 1974); e.g. A working day in a factory (Theis-Berglmair, 2003, p. 236).

However, members of a meeting do not just have knowledge about the formalities of a meeting. They also know about the rules of conduct, i.e. the norms about how to make conversation and how to behave appropriately in a given situation (Goffman, 1974). Also, despite the formality in a meeting, behaviour during the meeting is variable. The reason for this variation stems from the existence of speech acts. Individuals express their behaviour, which must be seen as individual strategic action (Giddens, 1984), through use of speech acts. Hence, even if people adapt to the typified patterns of communication (genres), their individual actions within the genre always vary with respect to their motives, as well as to their communicative capabilities. Accordingly, they may *play strategic games* in genres, or with genres, in order to follow individual strategies. The time frame, the agenda, the argumentation order, etc. may constitute rather fixed structures within a business meeting, but it is obvious that individuals can play or within these structures; e.g. to exert power (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980), to exert ambiguous action (Eisenberg, 1984), to build an individual image, to try to raise their individual status, to be trusted, etc. (Goldhaber, 1990; Lehner, 2009).

## **2.2 Computer-mediated Communication**

‘Playing strategic games’ in conversations, which can be regarded as normal human behavior, also happens in computer-mediated communications (Jäckel, 2008). Studies from as early as the 1980s have shown that there are both differences and similarities in human behaviour when it is written as text and computer-mediated, such as with e-mails and forum conversations. With their “media richness” theory, Daft and Lengel (1984) worked out that discursive coordination would be difficult if there was a lack of communicative channels, i.e. if gestures and facial expressions are absent, which was typical for computer-mediated communication in the 1980s. Contrariwise, Kiesler et al. (1984) and Sproull and Kiesler (1986) worked out that the absence of these so-called “social cues”, which are not only expressed by gestures and mimics but by all kinds of signs that lead to the evaluation of others, could also be beneficial. Hierarchical differences, for example, are expressed by social cues. This could be a dominant voice, a domineering appearance, a large office with a secretary in front, etc. The absence of these cues, according to Kiesler et al. (1984) and Sproull and Kiesler (1986) would lead to more egalitarian structures in organisations. Walther (1996) showed how individuals can use the absence of social cues in CMC to establish identities they prefer. Spears and Lea (1992) pointed to the possibility that a change of individual identity does not need to happen by strategically reflecting conduct, but that it may happen naturally among members of virtual communities.

Hence, computer-mediated written communication, on which corporate social media is mainly based (leaving Skype and other video and audio applications aside), has an impact on organisational structures even though the communication situation must be regarded as rather poor in terms of media richness. With respect to behaviour, there might be differences in terms of media richness between the

online and offline world, but there are also similarities. Chatting face-to-face, for example, happens through spoken words. But written words in online chat channels similarly show characteristics of spoken language (Beißwenger, 2007, Tipp, 2008). What is common to both modes is that there are communication standards and communication strategies. This incites the idea that written communication in certain media may also be able to establish interrelational situations. Other technical means like the indication of who is online right now, quasi-synchronous communication, etc. establish virtual 'nearness', which also helps to foster relational situations (Hauptmann, 2012).

Recalling genres, as introduced above, indicates that all this obviously happens within some kind of social structure. The analysis of genres has a long tradition in research to computer-mediated communication (Firth et al., 2003). Yates and Orlikowski (1992) showed in what stages the business e-mail as a genre has been developing since, from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century's business letters. In terms of form and purpose, there are differences but also structural similarities. Both the e-mail as well as the ancient business letter serves a coordinative purpose. But concerning the form, i.e., style and structure, both the two hundred years old business letter as well as the thirty years old e-mail have changed. Nowadays, e-mails encompass all kinds of communicative styles, ranging from very formal to very informal. This depends on the formal purpose but also on inherent social structural conditions, such as power and hierarchy, that are manifest in e-mail communication (Jäckel, 2008).

Here again, genres and speech acts are interrelated. This relationship corresponds with the relationship between structure and action in Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. Form as well as purpose of linguistic genres are socially constructed. People "enact" genres, which means in terms of style and purpose, there is a succession of speech acts over time that manifest as linguistic patterns. Speech acts do not need to be vocal but can also be conducted by written text (Bazerman, 1994; Cooren, 2004). Hence, they can be identified in computer-mediated conversations too (Dietz and Widdershoven, 1991; Yetim, 2006). Besides written text, there are other modes of expressing speech acts, such as smileys (Dresdner and Herring, 2010). However, focusing on speech acts as social practice leads straight to the analysis of behaviour.

### 3 The Analysis of Computer-mediated Action

This section shows how a combination of genre analysis and speech act analysis can be used to investigate single incidences of online communication. It also reveals the reasons why this combination is useful and might even be necessary in many situations. This section starts with an outline about structuration theory, which represents the theoretical background. Descriptions of genre and speech act analyses, as well as the difference between both are following. The section concludes with a joint view on both analysis methods by means of exerting an exemplary situation of discursive coordination.

### 3.1 A Theoretical Frame based on Structuration Theory

With reference to Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984) and Goffman's (1974) Frame Analysis, the complex entanglement of structural conditions that comes with computer-mediated communication can be characterised as a "social media frame" (Hauptmann, 2012; Hauptmann and Steger, 2013). A corporate frame might be seen as a working day for members of the corporation, for example on a production site or within an office (Theis-Berglmair, 2003), where the structural conditions are very different from other frames like, such as the attendance in a sports stadium, being at home with friends, etc. Within such frames people act according to norms and world views that are appropriate to the situation. Norms and world views are the *rules* in Giddens' model of structuration. Furthermore, according to Giddens, these activities happen as an enactment of *resources* which are, likewise, available in the situation, such as technical devices, other material conditions, time, space and power over people. The perspective is on the enactment of structures rather than on structures themselves on the one hand, and on the embeddedness of action in structures with the idea that each act will at least slightly change structures on the other (Ortmann, 20013, 2010). According to Giddens, it ought to overcome the long lasting sociological problem of overemphasising structure over action by one fraction of scholars, or action over structure by the other. He sees social dynamics as a process in which structure is constantly changed by social action and action is constantly influenced by structure – hence the term "structuration", which does not favour the one over the other but emphasises the interwovenness of both.

Notwithstanding this interwovenness, with structuration theory it is possible to focus on structure and on action with different emphasis. According to Giddens (1979), the former would be an institutional analysis and would take action out of focus by stating that certain activities can be seen as granted; the latter, however, would be seen as action analysis and would "bracket" (Giddens, 1979) structures as granted. Even if it is possible to focus on both structure and action separately, Giddens opted for a view that would be considering both, especially when he, later on, conducted his structuration theory (Walgenbach, 2006). In their historical analysis on the development from the business letter to e-mail communication, Yates and Orlikowski (1992) bracketed action and focussed on social structures, which means they executed a genre analysis.

In terms of language itself and its manifestation, both structure and action are in constant interplay (Bazerman, 1994; Miller, 1984). Hence, on this very basic level of social structure and action, it might be especially important to have this interplay in consideration rather than bracketing one of both. In organisation science in general, as well as with respect to information systems research, much theoretical and empirical work has been done on institutional analysis in terms of language. This is known

as genre analysis. The action part, however, seems to be underrepresented in this respect – at least in terms of theorising, and especially with respect to structuration theory.

Action, as one main component of structuration theory, would mean to *enact* natural or technical resources (e.g. someone’s physiological outfit that is involved with communication, such as a pen or social media) and genres (institutionalised topics which constitute the rules of communication) in order to voice. Voicing, however, is a speech act. In Giddens’ model, speech acts can easily represent the realm of communicative action. They are the communicative activities on the individual level, and they cause a different state for the future world (Giddens’ definition for action) no less than other forms of interacting with the world do (Ortmann, 2004), which classifies them as social action.

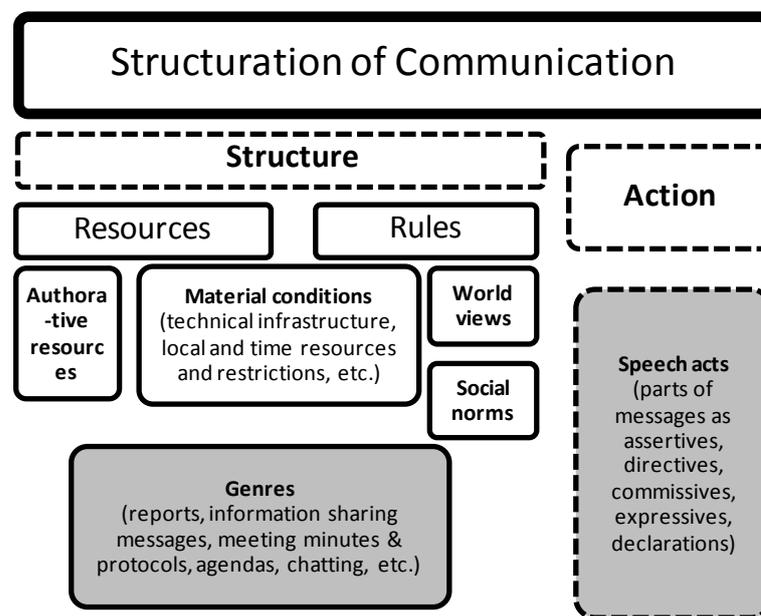


Figure 1: Frame of Communicative Activities based on Structuration Theory

But how does this connect to social media? By identifying written-down speech acts in legal texts, Bazerman (1994) shows that acting with written words is possible. They would perform social action within the genre of legal texts. Genres can be regarded as institutions, whereas speech acts are activities that serve individual purposes and strategies. In the structuration theoretical framework this can be sketched like in Figure 1. In the following section, both genre analysis and speech act analysis are briefly summarised.

### 3.2 Genre Analysis

Genres as patterns of communication have been the subject of research in computer-mediated communication since the beginning of the 1990s (see Firth et al., 2003), and recently in social media too (Herring et al., 2005; Java et al., 2007; Riemer and Richter, 2010; Riemer et al., 2011). By classifying con-

versations in different genres such as asking questions, sharing information, discussing, coordinating, etc., Riemer and Richter (2010) sort conversation streams of corporate microblogging into different structures of coordination between organisation members. However, this analysis focuses exclusively on formal structures and provides no insight into behavioural characteristics. Other analyses revealed CMC situations of everyday human conduct with informal quality and classified them as genres; for example communication about people's own mental states, giving opinions, making anecdotes, etc. (Naaman et al., 2010). But according to Riemer and Richter (2010, p. 11) conversations like these are typical for Twitter and other conversations that happen in non-organisational contexts, and they are mainly about the self, whereas genres would be typical for organisational conversations "with the *others* in mind".

But this verdict is far too simple. In each of the above described frames of action the conversations represent some kind of typified rhetoric activity that is well known and accepted. In organisational conversation, many genres are institutionalised in a formal manner and their purpose is for the sake of organisational coordination. Conversations on Twitter and other social media, by contrast, constitute a rather informal style with a purpose for the sake of self-promotion, amusement or achieving individual goals. These situations are not at all free of genres, but other kinds of genres are at play here (which have, by the way, to a far lesser extent been subject of genre analyses and therefore might be still uncovered broadly). Hence, not only in formal, well defined genres is organisational action prevalent but also in situations of talk within organisations (Brünner, 2000). On the other hand, there are executions of individual goals and interests by means of communication in all situations in organisational frames that are prevalent too. In order to get access to them we need to refer to the concrete social practice of conversation – speech acts.

### **3.3 Speech Act Analysis**

Similar to genre analysis, adopting speech act theory and theories about communicative action in information systems research can be traced back to the 1980s (Dietz and Widdershoven, 1991; Goldkuhl and Lyytinen, 1982; Ngwenyama and Lyytinen, 1997; Winograd and Flores, 1986). These studies focussed on streams of individual communicative action as it occurred in computer supported cooperative work (CSCW), be it formal or informal, individually strategic or to achieve mutual understandings. Speech acts might be vocally expressed (Austin, 1975) or expressed as written text (Bazerman, 1994; Cooren, 2004). Searle (1975) classifies them as "representatives" (e.g. claiming), "directives" (e.g. commanding), "commissives" (e.g. promising), "expressive" (e.g. saying sorry), and "declarations" (e.g. finding someone guilty). By focussing on the complexity of human conduct that comes with the analysis of these speech acts, studies like those mentioned above gave the ambiguous status of CMC situations more credit than genre studies do. Ambiguity, however, means that action cannot

clearly be typified as a linguistic pattern, but that it gets its meaning in the context of actual conversation. Irony, for example, has many characteristics of ambiguity because, by its nature, it shifts between seriousness and wittiness on a very thin line. We come back to this thin line further below.

Information systems researchers did map all kinds of speech acts in order to find ways to cope with problems such as disagreements (Dietz and Widdershoven, 1991) or ethical issues (Yetim, 2006) that occur during discursive coordination on CSCW platforms. The authors followed a speech act approach even though these platforms most often offered just formal genre specific communication, which means CSCW platforms consisted of hard-wired structures that made typified forms of communication possible but did more or less restrict open communication styles. On most of these platforms, community building, creation of trust, etc. by way of conversation was hardly possible (Ngwenyama and Lyytinen, 1997). Hence, CSCW did barely allow for expressing behaviour and individual strategic conduct. Dietz and Widdershoven (1991, p. 247) came to the conclusion that the design of CSCW platforms should allow “for detection of expressions of will (imperativa) in distinction from requests and commands (regulativa)” in order to stimulate effective organisational coordination.

Notwithstanding the limits of CSCW in those days, the emphasis on speech acts by these older studies is instructive. Looking back to these studies’ rationale from this paper’s perspective, current social media platforms follow in a natural way the affordances stated by Dietz and Widdershoven. Recent social media platforms are open to all kinds of genre and speech act usage because they correspond to the principles of ‘Enterprise 2.0’, being initiated without any given structure or norm and getting these structures and norms as well as the purpose of the platforms only during the course of actual usage (McAfee, 2006).

### **3.4 The Differences between Genres and Speech Acts**

After this overview on information systems research towards genres and speech acts we could get the impression that speech acts such as orders (to order) or threats (to threaten) could be genres by themselves. However, they are not. To show this, it is necessary to draw the border between these two phenomena more accurately. The following fictive example may serve as clarification of the difference between genre and speech act:

*I will drop in, tomorrow.*

It is not possible to get the right meaning of this sentence without knowing the context. The sentence is highly “indexical” (Garfinkel, 1967), i.e. it may convey very different information and acts, depending on the context. It could be seen:

- a) as *information* within a time-schedule genre; hence, we could classify it as a corresponding subgenre, for example as a genre called *making an appointment*;
- b) as a *promise* to a friend;
- c) as a *threat*, pronounced by a tax investigator.

In a formal situation such as a time-schedule genre, the aims of conversational acts are explicit. Therefore, a) could be classified as a (sub-)genre. However, according to the definitions by Austin (1975), Giddens (1984), and Searle (1969), it must also be seen as a speech act as, apparently, it would change the “course of events” (Giddens, 1984, p. 14) after it is spoken out. According to Searle’s (1975) taxonomy of speech acts, this would be a “commissive” speech act, representing a commitment. Hence, the genre “making an appointment” would correspond with the commissive speech act “to commit”.

The alternatives b) and c) however cannot be clearly classified as genres, with c) maybe the least. The argumentation is: Referring to c), the tax investigator threatens someone with an intrusion. According to Searle’s taxonomy this would be a commissive speech act too. But right at hand, we do not really know a linguistic type of routine, a genre, into which this commissive speech act would fit. If there is no clear genre at hand, speech acts are open for indefiniteness. It could be a threat, but it could also be an expression of irony conducted by the tax investigator (an “expressive” speech act). It could even be both at the same time when interpreted differently by the actors. This is something that goes along with every day communication, and especially with expressions of irony: misunderstandings. It might be meant ironically from the perspective of the tax investigator but perceived as a threat by the tax payer. Only further investigations of the situation would reveal what kind of speech act it is. This example shows that it is necessary to take a hermeneutic stance by trying to reveal the intention of actors.

Social media conversations are full of this kind of ambiguity. Therefore, they are difficult to classify as speech acts but even more so as genres. For applying genres, we would need to declare some kind of typified rhetoric action that fits with the situation on a whole (i.e., that meets the perspectives of all genre members), whereas with speech acts we are able to assign them to single actors and classify them according to the actors’ strategies and sense-making. Therefore, employing speech acts as an analytical focus has some advantages.

This applies to the investigation of purposeful organisational communication as well. We may think of the initiating of “awareness” within virtual workgroups. Awareness enables transparency among workgroup members and their activities (Gutwin and Greenberg, 2002; Heath et al., 2002). Stipulating awareness, understood as enabling processes of diffusion of information, helps to coordinate complex organisational processes. In particular with microblogging and other kind of status messaging in cor-

porate social media, these, according to Enterprise 2.0 (McAfee, 2006), rather open use scenarios bring in awareness by nature. The flow of communication may contain some informal conversations, but, nevertheless, they also may comprise some important information for the sake of organisational processes (Böhringer et al., 2009). Whether information is relevant or not depends not so much on the sender's intention but rather on the receiver's request (Böhringer, 2009).

The reverse logic of the direction of information diffusion (the focus lies not so much on processes of sending a message but rather on the request of messages) especially makes it difficult to assign communicative patterns to particular genres from the standpoint of the analyst. The reason is that asymmetrical sense-making happens, which means that the intention of the sender may be different from the intention of the receiver, but the receiver always decides for what the message is useful. It is particularly this phenomenon of asymmetrical sense-making that contributes to awareness in projects and work processes. Consider the following (fictive) message in a corporate social media message stream:

*I am happy, next week I am in Spain.*

The purpose of this message from the sender's view might be merely phatic, meaning that the sender wants to contribute to the coherence of the community (Malinowski, 1949). However, in the course of a project or a work process, this statement may also contain important information; for example, if someone else wants to meet this person the following week but was not informed about the absence of the colleague. Now he knows. From the viewpoint of knowledge management, this kind of status sharing is efficient because it allows for serendipity, which means it enables welcomed coincidences (Hauptmann and Gerlach, 2010).

However, we as analysts are barely able to assign it to a genre, but we are able to assign it as phatic communication (an expressive speech act). Hence, regardless of what the consequences are, for exerting adequate speech act analysis the intention of an act is decisive.

### **3.5 Example for the Interplay of Genres and Speech Acts in Situations of Discursive Coordination on a Microblogging Platform**

By contrasting genres with speech acts, we may get the opinion that we should choose speech acts exclusively in order to analyse organisational behaviour on social media platforms. However, this is not the case. Genres are not irrelevant. They help to identify and describe the very situation in which behaviour happens. As shown in the section above, situations of ambiguity are prevalent in every day communication. However, in organisational contexts behaviour is normally embedded in more or less well defined genres. Hence, we should be able to identify activities within genres (Bazerman, 1994). Another example from a real case will clarify what is meant:

*In the medium term a joint project must be considered.*

This sentence as well as the other written words shown in Figure 2 are part of a timeline of the professional microblogging tool Communote, which has been used for discursive coordination in a professional setting (a research group at the university). Sentences like this one are very common in professional online communication on social media platforms. Embedding this sentence into the context of the situation of discursive coordination reveals certain genres as well as certain strategies enacted by means of speech acts. With respect to the relation between genres and speech acts it is worth breaking down the situation analytically.

Without knowledge of the greater context (the encompassing genre in which this sentence was written), it could be assumed that this is, according to Searle’s (1975) taxonomy, a directive (command) or a declarative (decision making) speech act (depending on whether “must be considered” is meant as a command or a decision). But if we consider the context as genre and conduct a genre analysis, this sentence would correspond with neither of the two speech acts. It is embedded in a larger section that we can classify as a ‘meeting minutes’ genre (Figure 2).

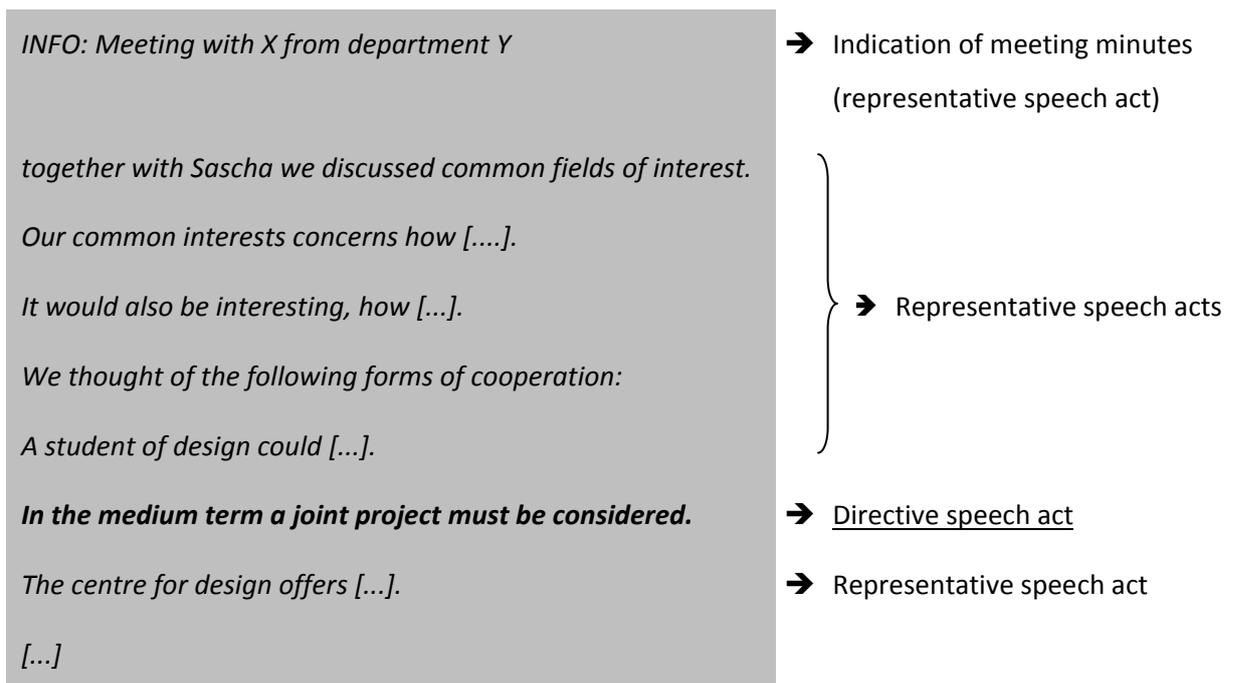


Figure 2: Speech acts within a meeting minutes genre conveying strategic conduct

We may assume that all of these sentences in the meeting minutes are reflections of what was said during that meeting. Hence, according to Searle’s taxonomy, all sentences must be classified as “representatives”, saying that “something’s being the case” (Searle, 1975, p. 355) because meeting minutes mirror what was said during a meeting. However, by means of participant observation it was revealed that the sentence in bold letters was not uttered during the meeting at all. Therefore, with reference to the intention of the writer of this message, it cannot be classified as a representative speech act but

must be seen as a “directive” speech act, i.e., as an attempt “by the speaker to get the hearer to do something” (Searle, 1975, p. 355).

This is a typical example of strategic organisational behaviour on social media platforms. The writer of the meeting minutes used this formal genre in order to act strategically insofar as he employed a directive speech act. He activated the genre meeting minutes as a resource in order to impose his own account. Hence, this part of the meeting minutes was not intended for information providing (as a representative speech act would do). It shows a strategic exertion of ambiguity by using a medium differently from its designation (Eisenberg, 1984), and more precisely it shows that a genre as a normative linguistic pattern has been used differently from its designation.

## 4 Implications for Organisational Research on Social Media

The example above shows that the employment of genre analysis as the sole analytical tool in order to investigate online behaviour is not adequate because it does not meet the levels of complexity of online discourse. The example also shows that even though this kind of conversation can be analysed ex-post, it does not mean that everything in terms of actors’ intentions can be uncovered. It was a mere coincidence to be able to participate during the meeting and, therefore, to be able to identify the bold sentence in Figure 2 as a directive speech act instead of a representative speech act. Hence, when studies classify activities of discursive coordination only by the amount of genre enactments without taking notice of speech acts, like it was done in the study of Riemer and Richter (2010), the distribution of genre categories could be much different from those measured.

Susan Herring (2004) states that online communication can be classified in four different layers, and that each calls for different research methods. Text structures should be analysed by genre analyses, the meaning of text by semantics and pragmatics, interactions by conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, and social behaviour by socio-linguistics and discourse analysis. Contrary to Herring, this paper shows by revealing the interrelations between genres and speech acts that connections between these layers are pervasive and analytically relevant. Therefore, it may not be wise to analyse one layer and ignore the others. With respect to Giddens’ (1979) differentiation between institutional analysis (focusing on structures and ‘bracketing’ action) and action research (vice versa), this paper shows that, referring to organisational communication events as micro-structures and action, it is necessary as well as possible to combine both analysis methods.

The examples in Section 3 facilitate discussing some implications for organisational research. First, strategic action on social media is not necessarily less difficult to identify than in face-to-face situations even though the communication is manifested as written text. As shown in the example case above, even with reference to the most basic incidences of social conduct (by differentiating between

genre and speech act), it might lead to misinterpretation because the necessary context to understand strategic conduct might still be too incomplete for decent propositions. Hence, even in online research participant observation may not become obsolete.

The second implication concerns the research setting. As the arenas of activity on social media platforms resemble arenas of face-to-face interaction much more than other IT environments of the past did, the (online-)research setting consists of a socio-technical frame that sometimes correlates with the medium (e.g. a Corporate Wiki as an encyclopaedia) but may also extend the linguistic patterns of a genre (encyclopaedial articles). Social corporate networks similar to Facebook, such as the professional microblogging platforms Yammer and Communote, are especially used for multiple purposes. This means that on these platforms many different genres fulfil many different tasks which are not only work oriented but also social, expressed by many different individual strategies. Organisational communication in general is pervaded by smooth transitions between task related and social communication, in which the latter fulfils organisational functions nonetheless (Brünner, 2000). Particularly with respect to discursive coordination tasks in modern organisations and in knowledge management, the transition from work related communication to social communication and vice versa happens very smoothly (Böhringer et al. 2009; Gutwin and Greenberg, 2002).

However, concerning communicational form and function in terms of the enactment of genres, there are also limitations in individual strategic conduct. Höfllich (1998) showed with reference to Goffman (1974) that a socio-technical ‘computer frame’ consists of social and technical rules that refer to the expectancies as well as to social norms of the actors involved. These rules are compulsory for actors. A similar argumentation comes from Herring (2007), who suggests a classification scheme consisting of social and technical limitations and enablers of communication. This classification scheme offers a frame for describing the socio-technical environment in which the execution of speech acts may happen. It also refers to other kinds of online behaviour apart from writing texts, such as giving ‘Likes’, showing oneself as being online, etc. (Hauptmann, 2012).

Thirdly, by connecting the interplay of genres and speech acts to Giddens’ (1984) model of structuration we can analytically connect micro-social behaviour to organisational structures in order to analyse organisational change: Individuals “enact” the genres as rhetoric patterns that we regard as organisational structure. The practice of enactment, i.e. the realm of “action” in Giddens’ model, corresponds with speech acts. This reference to Giddens’ structuration theory allows for an integration of social media and communication research on one hand, and structuration theory’s long lasting tradition in organisational research in general (Walgenbach, 2006) and information systems research in particular (Jones and Karsten, 2008) on the other hand. This perspective allows for analytically bridging different structural levels of organisations. Considering the focus on the structuration of language as the

most basic form of organisational process, it might be adapted for investigations of the structuration of information systems and, eventually, the structuration of rules and resources in modern organisations.

For example, Mayer and Schoeneborn (2008) assume that user generated content, one of the main characteristics of the principle of Web 2.0, may lead to revaluations of leadership behaviour insofar as the contingency of decisions may become transparent due to the manifestation of decisions as written texts that are viewable ex-post. Leadership decisions like these occur more and more as components of organisational social network communication. By focussing on the basic sequences of decision-making processes – i.e. speech acts embedded in genres – we may be able to reconstruct organisational changes, such as the decline of authority over time due to the disclosure of contingencies of decisions.

Furthermore, according to structuration theory, social norms are reproduced by social practices, i.e. by successive acts of conduct. If the practices change, the norms will alter, too. How, we may ask, do norms alter when the youngest cohort of the so-called digital natives enter the organisations and meet the older cohorts on corporate social media platforms? Digital natives bring in their own norms about online behaviour, which are acquired by usage of other online environments such as Facebook. They may infiltrate the corporate systems with their own norms, manifest in genres and being reproduced by rhetoric action norms which are still alien to organisations. Moreover, with reference to critical organisation theories about the reproduction of social structures like Ortmann's (2003; 2010) accounts on deviant behaviour and rule drifting, there are, according to Hauptmann et al. (2012), good reasons to assume that digital natives will set the agenda on corporate social media frames and alter structural settings within the organisations. All this happens on a daily basis on social media platforms, which can be described as enacting linguistic structures (genres) by ongoing social practice (speech acts).

With the implications given, the analytical perspective outlined in this paper may be considered as a powerful tool for investigating the daily behaviour on social media platforms in organisations. Nevertheless, there are some limitations in the paper. First, the understanding of strategic action and behaviour is rather broad. It refers to Giddens' (1984) understanding of strategic conduct as purposeful action which does not cover micro-political behaviour. Only the example in Section 3.5 reveals a closer understanding of the term 'strategic' by referring to micro-political action. There could be a more elaborated differentiation on strategic action, but this was beyond the intentions of this paper. Also, discussions concerning the different modes of action that are possible according to genres have been omitted. For example, when speaking about online behaviour, only written text was taken into account, but applying smileys or pressing the "Like" button in Facebook or in the professional microblogging tool Yammer also constitutes human conduct. Smileys can even be regarded as speech acts (Dresdner and Herring, 2010). However, it is rather obvious that written text is still the main mode of human action in contemporary social media.

There exists a wide range of methods to investigate computer-mediated action of which speech act analysis and genre analysis are only two (Herring, 2004) or, in their combination, only one. Investigating turn-taking procedures or spelling, for example, can provide information about power structures and hierarchical differences (Jäckel, 2008). However, turn-takings, situation-oriented sorts of spelling and other socio-linguistic incidents all happen within genres, and it is worth describing them in detail. The aim of this paper is to guide analysers to do exactly this.

Particularly when regarding many possible models of organisational behaviour as a result of the relative openness of corporate social media's use scenarios (McAfee, 2006), it is necessary to integrate more information about the socio-technical context, because this also affects the mode of social action. This could mean to integrate information about the socio-structural conditions (who are the actors, how many, for what purpose are they acting, what are the norms of communication) as well as the technical conditions (platform design in relation to privacy, to the indication of nearness and to an enrichment of media channels), like as described by Herring (2007) and Höflich (1998). This kind of integration should lead to a powerful analysis framework for investigating every-day behaviour in modern organisations in which the usage of social media is pervasive.

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## 5 References

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