

CONFERENCE CALLS, THE BUSINESS MEETINGS OF  
THE 21ST CENTURY: A MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH  
TO AN EMERGING GENRE

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During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, communication in the American corporate world has been affected significantly by changes in technology and the impact of globalization. For example, the new trends in outsourcing have, in part, been possible due to computer mediated forms of communication that allow a salesman in the USA to send a project, before he goes home in the evening, to an engineer in India and to have that project completed and on the salesman's desk the following morning. (12 personal communication). American corporations are spread all over the world. At present, more and more operations are being outsourced to countries such as Brazil, India or China where the cost of labor is very low. This is hardly a new trend. What is new is that it used to be the manual, labor intensive jobs that were outsourced to developing countries, whereas now, it is also the highly skilled, technical jobs that are being outsourced, as the example above illustrates.

In addition to having their operations disseminated all over the world, corporations are frequently located in different states within the USA. Upper and middle management individuals spend a fair amount of time traveling from location to location. Although traveling is quintessential to the corporate culture, the ever increasing cost of transportation – together with safety concerns in the aftermath of 9/11 - have somehow impacted travel frequency. However, the decrease in traveling has not resulted in a decrease in communication in corporate America as it has been supplemented by new forms of interaction such as e-mail, instant messaging (Lotus Notes-Sametime), web casts, videoconferences and conference calls.

In this paper, I will focus on conference calls (CCs henceforth) - the new and most prevalent meeting format in corporate America. My goal is to provide a high-level, descriptive account of CCs. I will argue that CCs constitute a sub-genre in their own right. A *blended* genre in which different modes of communication – telephone and computer mediated – are involved, none of them face to face. The communicative goal of CCs – which is, according to Bahtia (1997), the key characteristic feature of a genre –

together with the media through which they are mediated make for a very unique speech event in which new rules of engagement have to be learned in order for communication to succeed. By describing the defining characteristics of CCs and contrasting them with the traditional business meeting (TBM henceforth), this paper attempts to respond to the claim that "... many genres remain under or uninvestigated. It seems that we are just beginning to understand part-genres, blended genres, genre sets and genre systems". Belcher (2004: 177).

In my study, I will draw on concepts from a variety of fields and disciplines: (inter) cultural studies, genre and English for Specific Purposes studies, pragmatics, and conversational analysis, thus the title: a multi-layered approach.

#### 1. DESCRIBING CCs – A GENRE BASED APPROACH

Genre is here understood, following Swales (1990: 58) as:

A class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style...exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience.

For this descriptive analysis of CCs, I have relied on the dual approach proposed by Flowerdew (2005) which postulates a complementary usage of linguistic and ethnographic approaches to the study of genre. Seven one hour CCs were recorded between the months of November 2005 and March 2006 and then transcribed. All the participants in the CCs in the corpus were members of a prominent, financial corporation. Due to confidentiality concerns, I am not allowed to divulge the name of the corporation or the names, titles etc, of the people involved in the calls. I will refer to individuals using pseudonyms and will eliminate or slightly alter any information that may lead to the identification of the corporation. In the analysis, I will refer to the CCs assigning them a number that represents the order in which they occurred (CC#1, CC#2 etc.)

Many genre analysts (Swales, 2000; Flowerdew, 2005; Offord-Gray & Aldred, 1998) insist on the importance of gathering contextual information through interviews to understand how the speech events/texts under investigation fit in the overall communicative context. Accordingly, and in addition to the gathering of the linguistic data, I interviewed two members of

upper management at two different corporations. These interviews took place simultaneously with the gathering of the linguistic corpus and were performed either in person, by phone or via e-mail. I did not put together a specific interview protocol, but would contact my informants with questions that came up from the CCs themselves or, as I was researching the theoretical background for my study, I would discuss my ideas with them to make sure I was on the right track. When any of the information relates to the insights gained in conversation with my informants, I will refer to them as either I1 or I2.

### *1.1. Similarities and differences between meetings and CCs and their impact on communication*

CCs allow people in far and distant locations – countries, states – to meet. Sometimes people at the same geographical location will schedule a conference call instead of meeting face to face since this allows them to conduct business from the comfort of their offices. According to I1: “... conference calls were created to leverage technology and bring people together in a group (e.g. meeting) setting. Simply stated, the geography issue is resolved. People can meet from different cities or countries just by ‘dialing in’”.

Thus, CCs could be included within the genre: business meeting. Romano and Nunamaker (2001: 1) define meetings as follows:

a focused interaction of cognitive attention planned or chance, where people agree to come together for a common purpose whether at the same time and the same place or at different times in different places...Our definition includes formal board meetings, casual hallway conversations, and internet enabled interactions through tools such as Netmeeting and discussion groups.

While this definition may be useful to capture the broad features of different kinds of meetings, TBMs and CCs among those, I believe it misses the crucial differences that exist between them. As Swales (2000: 63) points out, far from constituting independent, discreet categories “... genres are networked and reticulated. It is not clear, at the moment, how best to characterize these relationships, whether any kind of single characterization will work, or whether possible answers lie more in theory or in empirical investigation”.

The differences between TBMs and CCs impact communication at all levels and justify the classification of CCs as a separate genre or, at least, a sub-genre of the genre “business meeting”. As stated, it is one of the

purposes of this paper to analyze how the specific, genre characteristics of CCs impact communication. Although I am aware (see Pan, Scollon & Scollon 2002) of the major differences among business meetings in different cultures, the characteristics set out and discussed below apply just to corporate America's TBMs and CCs.

In what follows, I will discuss the similarities and differences between TBMs and CCs and I will illustrate the defining characteristics of CCs with examples from the corpus. Although the corpus is somewhat restricted in terms of hours and scope –since it only contains data from one corporation– I believe that the conclusions reached are representative based on the acquiescence of my two informants who have ample experience in participating in CCs. As they often complain, "... sometimes it feels we do not do anything else but attend CCs all day long...".

#### 1.1.1. Traditional business meetings (TBM)

Meetings have been addressed, defined and analyzed in the literature (see Romano and Nunamaker, 2001; Pan *et alii*, 2002 among others). Thus, it is not my intent to account for TBMs in detail. In this section, I will briefly discuss some of the main features of TBMs, some of which are shared by CCs, and I will use the contrast between the two to describe CCs.

Pan *et alii* (2002: 111) define American TBMs as: "... a decision-making process during which an agenda is followed and specific decisions should be made". According to the 3M meeting effectiveness study, based on a survey of over 900 meetings, the typical meeting in corporate America is a staff meeting held in the company conference room, starting at 11 am. It lasts 1 ½ hours and will be attended by 9 people who will be given 2 hours prior warning. In 63% of the cases, participants will receive no advance written agenda.

As discussed earlier, Swales (1990: 58) defined genre as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes". The focal purposes of meetings, according to the 3M meeting effectiveness study, are: to reconcile a conflict (29%); to reach a group judgment or decision (26%); to solve a problem (11%) and to ensure everybody understands (11%).

To achieve these communicative goals, TBMs display a type of discourse that is *transactional* in nature: the goal is the transmitting of information (versus *interactional* discourse where the establishing or maintaining social relationships is the primary objective). Face needs (Goffman, 1959; Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987) are taken into consideration but they are the face needs that are derived from participants' *roles*, not from participants as

individuals. The term role, in this sense, refers to participants' identities as members of the given corporate community of practice (Wenger, 1998) or a specific group, within that community, that is working on a project. At this point, it is useful to introduce the distinction between, interpersonal and intergroup communication proposed by Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988: 24):

Once individuals become aware of belonging to one or more social groups, their social identities begin to form...When social identity predominates, intergroup behavior occurs. Intergroup behavior, therefore, differs from interpersonal behavior in that its locus of control is social, not personal identity.

Thus, both TBMs and CCs constitute an example of *intergroup communication*.

Also the concept of *multi-participant interaction* (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004) is crucial for understanding both TBMs and CCs since it clearly affects the conversational structure and its reception. Thus, TBMs and CCs constitute a *polylogue* "... all communicative situations which gather together several participants". (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004: 3). As the author points out, conversational analysis, socio-linguistics and the ethnography of speaking have favored the dyad as the communicative unit *per excellence* thus "... limiting, first the situations which are examined (in any society, dyadic exchanges tend, in fact, to be in the minority) second, the cultures under consideration (many societies accord an even more important role than Occidental societies do to 'multi-party' gatherings...). The analysis of the CCs that make up this corpus will incorporate the terms of description and analysis set out for polylogues by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004).

TBMs involve face to face interaction that is heavily articulated around speech. Most participants have either previously met each other before or, if they have not, have the advantage of seeing the other participants. Thus, they can rely on the fundamental (55% or more of the message, according to the 3M meeting effectiveness study) communication guidelines afforded by non-verbal **communication** – provided that the meeting is held by individuals that share the same culture.

Although TBMs revolve around verbal communication, the use of a written document – the **agenda** – is one of their essential components. As indicated in the 3M study, 63% of meetings are held without the participants getting an advanced agenda. Thus, participants either receive the agenda before hand; they get it at the start of the meeting or actively contribute to create it before the meeting begins. The agenda structures the meeting in terms of time and contents and is a manifestation of the task oriented nature

of the American TBMs. The 3M meeting network defines the agenda as "... a roadmap that will ensure your meeting serves its purpose".

Audiovisual presentations, usually **Power Point presentations**, offer written and visual support to verbal communication and are also of common use in meetings.

**Minutes**, a brief written summary of the TBM, are put together by the leader of the meeting –less and less frequently by administrative assistants – to make sure that everybody present went away with the same ideas and conclusions and that there is consensus regarding future plans of action. As the 3M meeting network indicates, "The most important reason to create a record of a meeting is to create a shared group memory. Individuals selectively perceive, retain and recall their own experiences... meeting participants will remember a meeting quite differently from one another. If the group keeps an accurate record of the meeting, then you can (i) decrease the need to revisit decisions that were made; (ii) recall open issues and 'deferred' items with ease; (iii) have increased confidence that actions items will be done".

#### 1.1.2. Conference calls

As previously discussed, my main goal in this paper is to investigate a new emerging (sub)genre: CCs. CCs should be considered a sub-genre of the more general TBM. It should be noted that, although CCs and TBMs share very important, defining characteristics, they also differ substantially.

According to I1 and I2, the main communicative purposes of CCs are:

- 1) To manage a project
  - a.* review project status and discuss any outstanding issues;
  - b.* clarify tasks/action items required for each impacted business unit;
  - c.* collectively agree on target dates.
- 2) To reach a consensus on some type of issue

The communicative goals of CCs are certainly close, if not identical, to TBMs. Thus, it is not in terms of communicative goals that TBMs and CCs differ. It is the constraints imposed by non face to face communication on a multiparticipant interaction and the simultaneous use of synchronous computer mediated communication that differentiate CCs from TBMs. These constraints have such an impact on communication that they justify the categorization of CCs as a different or, a least, as a subgenre of the genre "business meeting".

Besides the communicative goals, TBMs and CCs share some defining characteristics. The *transactional* nature of discourse is also present in CCs. CCs are task-oriented: a group of people get together and they have a set time (an hour usually – although it is not infrequent for CCs to last longer- 12 personal communication) to go over the outstanding issues contained in the agenda. However, it is not unusual for participants to indulge in some type of small talk at the beginning of a CC while they are waiting for everybody to call in:

CC#5 Hello this is Louise

Hi Louise, how are you? We have not talked for a while

[Laughter]

That sounded like an evil laugh....

CC#7 Hi Anne, how are you? Are you feeling any better?

It is my allergies now

Are you allergic to work?

Aren't we all?

CC#7 This is Peter

Peter, are you ok? You sound sick

I am going through puberty... it is allergies. I can not even wear my contacts my eyes itch so bad...

An occasional comment about the weather, gas prices or the inconvenience of having to meet on a Friday afternoon at 4 pm –always in the opening and closing sections of the CCs – are about all the personal references found in the corpus. Once the leader starts the CC proper with “Ok, guys we are going to go ahead and get started” (CC#7) or “All right guys for the meeting today we are going to go over our target and we are also going to go over...” (CC#5) it is all about business.

#### 1.1.2.1. CCs and face work

The rules of social engagement reflect the “culture” – the way things are done in the corporation they work for. These are quite prevalent, with some variations, within American corporate culture. American corporate culture is but another manifestation of the underlying features of mainstream, American culture. The USA is a low-context, individualistic society:

Individualistic, low context cultures (with the United States as the prime example) emphasize individual value orientations, line logic, direct verbal interaction and individualist nonverbal styles... intentions are displayed clearly

and have direct correspondence with verbal and non-verbal patterns (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988: 90).

This low context-individualist orientation is clearly the foundation for the C-B-S (clarity, brevity and sincerity) style that has, according to Pan, Scollon and Scollon (2002: 111), "... spread throughout the business environment to become the dominant speaking style".

Just as it did in TBMs, in CCs, communication also occurs at the intergroup level, i.e. derived from participants' roles within the corporation. It also occurs at the intergroup level that the presentation of self and face work is done. Participants in CCs relate to each other and create their identities as members of a given corporation and, more specifically, as members of a group working on a particular project. This is obvious in I2's complaint that there are people who take things "... too personally". It is not you as an individual but the role that you are performing within the corporation that is either criticized or praised. Of course, the line that separates individuals from their roles is a fine one at that and this is obvious in participants' constant concern with face through the display of politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987). However, it is also part of their corporate identity to be "good team players", to be appropriate, to respect others' opinions, to avoid conflict, to look for agreement. Nevertheless, direct confrontation is sometimes necessary to achieve the desired outcome. This confrontation has to be handled in a "courteous and professional manner" (I2 personal communication)

In terms of politeness, the USA could be situated in the middle of the cline between negative and positive politeness cultures. Whereas individualism and thus negative politeness are prevalent, as "... privacy and autonomy are the trademarks of individualistic low-context cultures" (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988: 91), there is a general trend to de-emphasize power, at least superficially.

In all CCs participants, regardless of rank, are on a first name basis. The colloquial *you guys* or *you all* is frequently used to refer to the group.

CC#3 If you all would take a look at your screens  
CC#4 You all know about #?  
CC#4 You guys are seeing X?  
CC#6 Are you guys ok with it?



And the in-group status is reinforced by the pervasive use of acronyms and the use of inclusive “we”.

CC#2 We know that can't happen over night...

CC#3 Are we going to shoot for Friday?

CC#4 Ok, all right, let us go on to the next one.

CC#4 Is there a way we could have them propose a time and get back to us?

CC#6 Ok, so what we are saying is...

Acronyms deserve especial attention. Due to confidentiality issues, I can not illustrate this point with examples from my corpus. But their use is common to the point of making the contents of the conversation almost totally incomprehensible to outsiders. Acronyms are accessed and known by the in-group. It is a code that has to be learned and mastered in order to belong. Thus, they are a powerful rapport creating mechanism (Brown and Levinson, 1987/1987: 111) and help to reinforce in-group membership. The vast number and variety of acronyms used in corporations has resulted in the compilation and distribution of acronym guides in certain corporations (12 personal communication).

Participants in CCs follow the general trend of minimizing disagreement, emphasizing and seeking agreement which is quite prevalent in mainstream American culture and is also derived from the goal of CCs which is, in many cases, to reach consensus.

CC#5 Well, that is a point where we might disagree

CC#6 I am hesitant to do X unless we have a formal agreement. I have been through this before

CC#2 I agree with Ron, not a clean process...

CC#4 I agree with Jane. We are waiting for funding... we are waiting for the money

CC#6 Are you guys ok with that?

CC#6 I just want to make sure everybody agrees, that everyone understands culturally how we do it.

CC#6 I think that you are basically right, Terry.

I absolutely agree

I agree with that too

Also, there is a lot of positive reinforcement and thus attention to positive face needs.

CC#2 ... very, very, very good question

CC#2 I think that is great!

CC#4 Exactly.

CC#5 I think that what we are doing now is very valuable.

CC#6 Good question

CC#6 That is a good point

Criticisms tend to be very indirect, mostly off record. The participant doing the criticizing states it as if it were their own fault or impersonalises the wrong-doing, attempting not to address it directly to, and thus openly blame, one individual:

CC#2 It is the first time I have heard it stated (this is not what we had agreed on previously)

CC#2 For those questions, we need another meeting (the issues you are raising are not part of today's agenda; you are deviating from the goals we have set for today)

CC#2 Maybe I am missing the point (you are not explaining yourself clearly)

CC#2 We did not probably communicate well (if I made a mistake it is because you did not clearly explain to me what I was supposed to do)

CC#3 There seems to be room for improvement (You could have done a better job)

CC#4 Let me make sure I am understanding (you are not explaining yourself clearly)

CC#5 All I can see is cross scratching (I can not see what you are referring to on my screen)

CC#6 I am not sure I understand the point (you are not making sense)

CC#6 Maybe you dropped off when we had this conversation (what you are saying is not in line with what we had previously agreed on)

Acts that might be threatening to participants' negative face are usually compensated with negative politeness or are performed off record:

CC#2 Why don't you send that to me?

CC#3 If I can ask you to take a look at document #...

CC#4 If you pull X (a file available on line), there is a file there...

CC#6 That needs to be written down.

CC#6 Dan, would you be sending a note to everybody?... just with bullet points...

The examples above are just an illustration of the constant display of politeness strategies that indicates the concern of CCs' participants regarding face needs.

#### 1.1.2.2. CCs as polylogues

As indicated above, CCs calls are **polylogues**: they involve a large group of participants (up till 50, sometimes – I1 personal communication). Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004) presents a series of criteria that can be used to construct a typology of polylogues. According to those criteria, CCs would be *shared focus encounters* where the group is oriented toward one and the same activity.

One of the main issues that participants in polylogues have to resolve is the turn-taking system. There are many participants and, more importantly, they are at distant locations. So how does one keep people from interrupting constantly? How does one make sure that whoever needs to speak has equal access to the floor? How is the phenomenon of participants 'splitting up into conversations avoided? The CC leader (CCL henceforth) –acting as a facilitator– the agenda –as a structuring tool– and the level of formality of CCs (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004) serve these purposes.

As is the case in meetings, CCs are structured around an **agenda**. Call times are organized by the CCL person who also puts together the agenda. S/he does this by either checking open times in participants' schedules through Lotus Notes or by negotiating meetings times at the end of a CC, if the meeting is recurrent (like the CCs in this corpus) (I2 personal communication). It is the project manager (or CCL) who is responsible to lead the conference call and follow the agenda. Additionally, they will publish **minutes** to ensure everyone understands "who is doing what and when" (I1 personal communication). Sometimes CCs are recorded. That helps to keep records and everyone accountable both for their contributions to the talk and for the tasks that were assigned to them. (I1 personal communication).

The **agenda** plays an even important role in CCs than it does in meetings. It really helps participants to stay on target and on topic. The agenda is a fundamental part of the script, i.e. a structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context (Schank and Abelson's (1977) definition, quoted in Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004: 8). This script is very fixed in CCs and that is a point where they may differ from other polylogues that are characterized, according to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004: 7), by "... their flexibility, instability and unpredictability". Because of the difficulties associated with non face to face communication, the agenda becomes the

backbone of the CC. In all the CCs in the corpus, the sequences of the discourse are structured around the agenda. The CC leader acts as a facilitator of the meeting. S/he introduces the topics for discussion that follow closely the agenda participants have previously received.

The leader usually makes sure that the discussion point at hand is finished before moving on to the next one.

CC#5 CCL Any questions about this?

CC#5 CCL We are going to go ahead and close it.

CC#4 CCL Everybody ok with this update?

CC#4 CCL Ok, those were all our open questions.

CC#6 CCL Do we need to work on this at all?

In most instances, the closing of one sequence and the beginning of the next are framed by the use of discourse markers: *all right* (to conclude), *ok* (to initiate). The use of the discourse markers is emphasized by an accompanying rising intonation. This is a heads up to participants: when the new sequence starts, and new topics are introduced, the turn taking system will be rearranged depending on who needs to contribute to this particular point. According to the topic of discussion, the levels of participant ratification will change and with it their claims to the floor. (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004: 13).

CC#4 CCL: Ok, all right, let us go on to the next one.

CC#4 CCL: Ok we are going into #

CC#5 CCL: Ok, # is our next follow up.

CC#5 CCL: Ok, so the next is X

CC#6 CCL: Ok, so I would like to call it a day unless anybody would like to talk about anything else.

Generally, participants identify themselves when they want to take the floor.

CC#1 Ron (CCL), I had a question

CC#2 I had a quick question. This is Ron.

CC#3 Anne (CCL), this is Kim, I have to go at 10:30.

It is not infrequent for the CCL to select the next speaker by either addressing the person directly with his/her first name:

CC#5 Ron, would you like to talk and explain X?

CC#7 CCL: Those are the things we need to talk about. Susan?

Sometimes, though, the floor is up for grabs:

CC#5 CCL: Does anybody remember?

CC#7 CCL: Does anybody else feel the way I do? If you do feel free to jump in.

Unless participants have been selected as next speaker by the CCL, or are engaged in a sequence and have already previously identified themselves, the CCL usually reminds them (indirectly) that they need to identify themselves when they wish to take the floor.

CC#5 Susan: It needs to come through

CCL: Is that Susan?

Susan: Yes, this is Susan, I am sorry.

#### 1.1.2.2.1. CCs as non-face to face polylogues

Two of the crucial differences between CCs and TBMs and that justify considering CCs as a sub-genre are related to the fact that CCs involve non face to face communication. This has an enormous impact on the ensuing interaction. It is not unusual for participants in a CC not to have met some of the other participants in person. According to my informants, especially I1, it is frequent to have worked and collaborated with somebody for years and not to have met in person. Communication (be it at the interpersonal or intergroup level) is based on uncertainty reduction and personality attribution processes (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988) which can not be relied upon here. Participants can draw few of the inferences about others that guide communication and help us in the process of understanding (Sperber, 1995) and in the choice of the right linguistic stimulus to convey the appropriate level of politeness.

Another shortcoming that CC participants have to deal with, and that is especially related to choice of politeness, is that because of the anonymity afforded by the telephone, one can never be sure how many people are present on the call. Although there is usually a roster that comes along with the agenda, it is common practice (I2 personal communication) to forward the time/phone/code information to other people (supervisors usually) who might have an interest in some part or the whole contents of the call. As an example, the agenda that I received for one of the CCs concluded by saying "Please, forward to any interested parties". So people may call in and not identify themselves.

Bell (1984: 159) proposed a framework, which he called “audience design”: “It assumes that persons respond mainly to other persons, that speakers take most account of hearers in designing their talk. The speaker is first person, primary participant at the moment of speech, qualitatively apart from other interlocutors. The first person’s characteristics account for speech differences between speakers. However, speakers design their language for their audience...We may distinguish and rank audience roles according to whether or not the persons are known, ratified or addressed by the speaker”. Thus, Bell established a difference among *addressees* (known, ratified and addressed), *auditors* (known, ratified, but not directly addressed) *overhearers* (known but not ratified participants), and *eavesdroppers* (whose presence is not known, whether intentionally or by chance).

One of the main factors that influence audience roles, according to Bell, is space. Since it is the speaker who assigns audience roles, the closest to him/her will be the addressee, the farthest away, the overhearer. In CCs, for obvious reasons, space can not determine audience roles. All participants are potential addressees or auditors. No participants in CCs could be classified as overhearers: anybody who attends a CC, whose presence is known, has to be ratified. Also, there is another way in which CCs –as all polylogues– differ from dialogues or trilogies “... they... place fewer constraints on participants, since the obligation to cooperate –being in a way ‘diluted’ by the larger group– is not as strong for individual speaker”(Kerbrat Orecchioni, 2004: 6). This is certainly true in the corpus here analyzed. Many participants kept a very low profile or even decided not make their presence known at all.

The possible eavesdropper acquires much more significance in CCs since superiors are the ones likely to be invited, likely perhaps to attend and not make their presence known. They become “referees” in Bell’s terms, since although not “present” at the interaction; they possess “such salience for a speaker that they influence speech, even in their absence.” (1984: 186). Of course, the role of referee can be extended to apply to all immediate and corporate superiors. It is their superiors’ “ultimate approval” that participants in CCs seek and therefore their speech accommodates to them (Giles & Powesland, 1975; Giles et alii, 1991).

An example of such eavesdropping took place in CC#5. The group was discussing a part of their project they had encountered some problems with. The CCL made some comment to the effect that they could not address those problems since there was no representative from the department in charge of solving it.

CC#5 CCL: There is nobody from that department.  
John: Yes, there is. This is John here. I must have pressed mute by accident.

Actually, John had not identified himself at the beginning of the CC and had not intervened previously, although the CC was almost reaching its conclusion. Therefore nobody knew he had been listening until that moment.

### 1.1.2.3. CCs and synchronous computer mediated communication

The use of synchronous computer mediated is commonplace during CCs. Participants use Lotus Notes Sametime to instant message each other during CCs.

A new layer of communication has been introduced with the conference call. We have a tool called Sametime, which is used for corporate instant messaging. So during a conference call meeting, there are many side conversations taking place. For example, let's say there are 4 different departments on the call; each with 3 representatives. Usually, there are 4 different "behind the scenes" conversations taking place. I might be chatting with my teammate in California during the meeting; asking questions and validating what someone else just said. It is sort of like an instant ability to pass notes, invisibly. Some examples of what my chat might look like:

Me: Did he just say we have until the end of the month to get this done?  
Teammate: Yes. It is impossible.  
Me: When did they first tell us about this?  
Teammate: Oct 10th. I have the email in front of me.  
Me: Forget it. They are not giving us enough time. I am going to tell them to push the date until Nov 15<sup>th</sup>  
Teammate: Good. I'll back you up

Then, I would speak at the conference meeting and feel comfortable that I have conferred with my teammates. Other teams are doing the same thing! It is funny sometimes; especially when there are pauses. People are getting opinions and facts before they speak. (II personal communication).

The concept "*hidden transcript*" put forth by Scott (1990) to describe the type of language that is used by lower groups when they are among their own kind could be readapted to describe the use of language in *Sametime* during CCs. As Scott explains, this hidden transcript may distinctly differ from the public forms of discourse that individuals from that group use when talking

to other groups or social classes. Certainly, the Sametime dialogues I have had access to vary substantially with respect to the “public” polylogue of the CCs.

*Sametime* is the vehicle through which alliances or coalitions are mostly established or maintained during polylogues. According to Bruxelles & Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004: 76): “All polylogues share one specific feature: they allow the participants to build alliances or coalitions with each other. This is indeed a fundamental aspect of these configurations”. These authors define coalitions as possessing the following characteristics: “... a coalition’s purpose and effect are often to change the balance of power within the conversation group... a coalition occurs within a context of antagonism.” (2004: 76). Especially in those cases in which CCs are scheduled to achieve consensus on an issue or to make decisions, it is not unusual for some CCs participants to have conferred beforehand to make sure where everybody stands. During the CCs itself, they will support, cue etc. each other through *Sametime*. (I2 personal communication).

During CC#7, an event occurred that illustrates the antagonistic feature of coalitions created or maintained through *Sametime*. The CCL addressed one of the participants by name, Helen, selecting and ratifying her as next speaker. However, not Helen but another CC participant, Sheena, answered – what would constitute an *intrusion* according to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2000: 5) – to let the CCL know that Helen had stepped out for a second. This would not be worthy of commentary were it not for the fact that Helen and Sheena were, at that particular moment, on two opposite geographical locations of the United States of America. Helen had instant-messaged Sheena to tell her she was leaving her desk for a second. As it happens, Helen and Sheena were two quite unwilling participants in this particular series of CCs. They both found the CCs quite useless and thought that the real issues, the ones they needed to address, were never discussed. Thus, they had probably been maintaining one of the multiple asides that *Sametime* mediates in the course of a CC. Through this communication they reinforced their alliance and their antagonism to the process in which they had been included against their will.

Besides the omnipresent use of *Sametime*, there are other internet mediated forms of communication that can occur during CCs. It is not unusual for people participating in a CC to access documents from the internet, usually forwarded by the person in charge of the call, and discuss them as part of the agenda. This audiovisual support is called *screen share*. As a matter of fact, in the course of almost all the CCs that make up this corpus, documents from the web were accessed by all participants and were the basis for the ensuing discussion.



Another way in which internet mediated communication is present in CCs is by means of the use of webcasts. Webcasts allow one of the participants in the CCs to give a power point presentation, that all can follow on their computers, and use the telephone for the verbal support. This method was not used in the present corpus, though.

I would like to conclude this high-level description of CCs by reiterating some of the points made throughout my discussion. Although sharing their main communicative purposes, a genre defining characteristic – CCs and TBMs differ in substantial ways that justify categorizing CCs as a different or, at least, a sub-genre of the genre “business meeting”. The non face to face, telephone and computer mediated nature of the communication places very specific constraints on the structure, the type and style of the allowable contributions and the kind of face work participants engage in. These features make CCs a very unique communicative event.

At the beginning of this paper, I quoted Belcher’s (2004: 177) claim to the effect that there are many types of genres that remain under or uninvestigated. By investigating CCs, I hope to have contributed to gain knowledge on one of those genres of which we still know little about.

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