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# Genre dynamism in IT professional communication

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**Abstract.** The paper presents the results of the cross-sectional empirical research exploring the network of genres in IT domain in Latvia. The theoretical basis for this research has been to a large extent grounded in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and the New Rhetoric genre schools. The empirical research method is a two-staged discourse analysis. During the first stage the data collection tools were semi-structured interviews with 25 IT professionals aimed to identify the recurrent genres pertinent to the domain and describe the social context in which they occur. The second stage involved genre analysis, in order to define the communicative aims and intertextual relations IT professional documentation and prove its recontextualised nature. The obtained results highlight the significance of the social context for conducting genre analysis in IT domain. They reveal that the genres in the professional communication network have hierarchical, sequential and transformational relations, with the business requirements, explaining the business logic of discursive practices, being the dominating one. Moreover, discursive practices facilitate uncovering constitutive intertextual relations and help to explain emerging genres and eliminating obsolete ones.

**Keywords.** Communicative aim, discursive practice, genre dynamism, recontextualisation.

## 1. Introduction

Outlining the background and the situational context of the study, recent decades have been characterized by rapid development in various branches of technology as well as increased information flow. One of the most dynamic spheres with complex communication frameworks is Information Technologies (IT). The English language has been playing a crucial role in these processes serving as a lingua franca for professionals' communication, expertise exchange, training and knowledge management and applying innovative solutions in business environment.

Moreover, the headquarters of leading software development companies, hardware manufactures and service providers like Apple, Microsoft, Hewlett Packard, Facebook are located in the USA, which contributes to the tendency of the ultimate domination or even hegemony of the English language in this domain.

The topicality of the study within Latvian context is determined by the fact that the leading local IT companies operate internationally and provide outsourcing activities (Accenture, Tieto, CTE, CTCO, Forticom) with English being as a primary means of communication. It sets the requirement for the employees to develop professional communicative competence for employees of all levels and forces them to deal with professional genre dynamism.

The abovementioned factors and the fact that the research papers addressing similar issues are scarce have determined the aim of the paper, which is:

- To investigate applied linguistic theories underlying the concepts of genre, genre analysis and genre dynamism in the institutional context;
- to identify the recurrent genres in the IT institutional domain, organize them into a system and determine their dynamic relations.

This research is based on the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and the New Rhetoric genre schools postulates. The empirical research method is a two-staged discourse analysis. During the first stage the data collection tools were semi-structured interviews with 25 IT

professionals aimed to identify the recurrent genres pertinent to the domain and describe the social context in which they occur. The second stage involved genre analysis, namely, identifying the communicative aims and intertextual relations of IT professional documentation and prove its recontextualised nature.

The results are of high practical value since they may be implemented to improve profession standards in IT domain, issued by the ministry of Education and Science, the syllabi within the curriculum higher professional education and design customized materials with an aim to prepare IT specialists that would meet labour market needs. They may also be used to train IT professionals on-site and design professional development courses, e.g. content and language integrated (CLIL) courses. The present research is a cross-sectional study of qualitative nature as it is aimed at describing institutional language use.

### 1.1. Genre and genre dynamism

In contemporary linguistics, the development of the genre concept has significantly been facilitated by the SFL, New Rhetoric School and ESP genre schools, the first two accounting for the phenomenon of dynamism..

The representatives of the New Rhetoric Studies (Miller 1984, Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995, Bazerman et al 2009) view genre as a social action, a reflection of the activities performed by the community, creating a shared knowledge base. In their views, genres not just express the communicative purposes within the discourse community but mediate the activities pertinent to the domain. Thus, while ESP genre scholars (Swales 1990, Swales and Feak 2004, Bhatia 1993, 2004) set an aim to identify genres, their communicative aims and examine structural and lexico-grammatical peculiarities, the New Rhetoric researchers address genres as “sociological concepts embodying textual and social ways of knowing, being, and interacting in particular contexts’ and consider genre textual regularities as socially constructed.” (Bawarshi, Reiff 2010:57).

Influenced by activity theory, ethnomethodology, Bakhtinian dialogism, phenomenology and rhetoric studies, the scholars assert that genres reflect the recurrent practices of a discourse community, are inextricably tied to the social context and form genre repertoires (Orlikowski and Yates 1994), genre hierarchies, systems and sets (Swales 2004) or genre ecologies (Spinuzzi 2000) etc.

One of the most notable definitions in the New Rhetoric tradition was provided by Miller who theorised upon and recontextualised the concept of genre as a social action and defined it “as typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations.”(Miller 1984:31)

Merging the views of social phenomenology and rhetorical criticism, the New Rhetoric scholars claimed that genres emerge from the “the knowledge that practice creates” (ibid:27) and govern work of organisations *per se* or the accomplishment of smaller tasks. Drawing on Campbell and Jamieson’s (1978) view that “a genre does not consist merely of a series of acts in which certain rhetorical forms recur[...] Instead a genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms driven by an internal dynamic” (1978: 21) and Bitzer’s (1968) notion of exigence, Miller (1984) suggested that people in their social networks recognize the need to respond (exigence) to specific situations, categorise those situations and select linguistic means to respond effectively, which explains the concept of genre dynamism in the institutional setting.

Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) followed a similar view and claimed that genres dynamically reflect the knowledge and activities of a discourse community and the processes of knowledge formation and genre formation are bound by a socio-cognitive perspective. They (ibid) outlined the following genre characteristics in relation to genre as a social action belonging to a discourse community:

- (1) dynamism;

## IV. Professional communication

Y. Kuzmina

- (2) situatedness;
- (3) form and content;
- (4) duality of structure;
- (5) community ownership.

They (ibid) claimed that genres change in accordance with the communicative needs of the discourse community and are viewed as “dynamic rhetorical forms that are developed from actors’ responses to recurrent situations and that serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning” (1995:4). They considered that genre repertoire, system or ecology reflect discourse community activities, actions and operations, and, therefore, change as soon as the activities change since “our knowledge of genres is derived from and embedded in our participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life.” (ibid:4) The activity being overarching, discourse community in New Rhetoric tradition should be regarded as a community of practice, which not only recognises the form and structure of certain genres, but also locates it in wider linguistic and socio-cultural context and applies it appropriately. Duality of structure presupposes that genre and social actions mutually influence each other. The ownership of genre as a social action is unique in a way that the participants involved in the process of communication share common knowledge base, but for the outsiders they are difficult to identify and manipulate.

### 1.2. Genre and genre systems

The views that genres should not be regarded in isolation but in relation to other genres reflecting the systems of activities were proposed by the researchers of the New Rhetoric Studies (Bazerman et al 2009, Orlikowsky & Yates 1994, Spinuzzi & Zachry 2000, Spinuzzi 2004) and later implemented by the ESP scholars (Swales & Feak 2004, Bhatia 1993, 2004). Discourse practices or social actions led researchers to look at genres of a discourse community as a system accounting for interdiscursivity. The scholars used a number of frameworks to describe genres that mediate social actions within complex systems of activities, namely, genre ecologies and genre assemblages (Spinuzzi, 2004), genre sets (Devitt 1991), genre constellations and networks (Swales 2004), genre colonies (Bhatia 2004), genre system (Bazerman & Prior 2004), genre repertoire (Orlikowski and Yates 1994).

Spinuzzi (2004) provided exhaustive definitions of genre assemblages, being an umbrella term for genre sets, genre systems, genre repertoires and genre ecologies, which sometimes are used interchangeably.

He drew a distinction among the terms in question (ibid) and defined genre ecology as

an analytical framework for studying how people use multiple artifacts – such as documentation, interfaces, and annotations – to mediate their work activities. Unlike other analytical frameworks, the genre ecology framework has been developed particularly for technical communication research, particularly in its emphasis on interpretation, contingency, and stability. Although this framework shows much promise, it is more of a heuristic than a formal modeling tool; it helps researchers to pull together impressions, similar to contextual design’s work models, but it has not been implemented as formally as distributed cognition’s functional systems. (2000:20)

Freedman and Smart (1997) shared a similar view and claimed that genre ecology reflects genres as activities cyclically performed by the members of discourse community, which, on the one hand are stable, possessing stable connections with other genres, and, on the other hand, may change in response to contingencies, i.e. “opportunistic coordinations that people and activities make among genres.” (Spinuzzi & Zachry 2000:200)

Spinuzzi & Zachry (2000) characterized ecologies in terms of contingency, decentralisation, and stability.

## IV. Professional communication

Y. Kuzmina

Another concept approaching genre network as a dynamic developing phenomenon is genre repertoire. Orlikowsky and Yates (1994), who coined the term, emphasised non-sequential overlapping nature of relation among genres and claimed that the members of discourse community are exposed to several genres at a time typical of their discourse practices.

In contrast, genre sets and genre systems are viewed as sequential phenomena, e.g. by Devit (1991) who claimed that 'in examining the genre set of the community, we are examining the community's situations, its recurring activities and relationships...this genre set not only reflects the profession's situations; it may also help to define and stabilize those situations.' (1991:340) Swales and Feak (2004) posited that temporary or individual ordering combines into genre sets with communicative event(s) being central. (ibid:23)

Spinuzzi (2004:2) proposed to compare the concepts described above against the following criteria: perspective, the mode of action, agency, relationship between genres and foreground genres. The results are presented in Tab.1 below.

	Genre sets	Genre systems	Genre repertoires	Genre ecologies
<b>Perspective</b>	Individual	Communitarian	Communitarian	Activity
<b>Model of action</b>	Communicative	Communicative	Communicative/ performative	Mediatory
<b>Agency</b>	Asymmetrical	Asymmetrical	Asymmetrical	Symmetrical
<b>Relationship between genres</b>	Sequential	Sequential	Sequential and overlapping	Overlapping/ intermediatory
<b>Foregrounded genres</b>	Official (stabilized)	Official (stabilized)	Official (stabilized)	Unofficial (dynamic) and official (stabilized)

Table 1: The Comparison of Genre Networks (Spinuzzi 2004:7)

The findings verify the distinction between the frameworks with different analytical focuses and support rather different agendas.

For the present research, genre repertoires and genre systems are of paramount significance as they reflect the genres of the particular discourse community, bearing a communitarian perspective. The users are affected through the communicative and communicative/ performative models of action since the genres in questions perform transactional or ideational language functions, possess a set of predictable communicative aims and induce the members of discourse community to action. In both cases the agency is asymmetrical since individuals are in control of genres in the process of discourse consumption and production. The nature of relations in genre is sequential (one antecedent or succedent to another) and sequential/ overlapping (with multiple genres operating simultaneously during a communicative event). The genres are viewed as stabilised (ESP) or stabilized for now (New Rhetoric).

Investigating the sequential genre organization further, according to Swales and Feak (2004), if genres are set in the logical order of occurrence, 'their chronological ordering, especially if one genre is antecedent for another' forms genre chains. (ibid:18) Other scholars (e.g. Berkenkotter, 2001) use the term system, applying it to the intermediate level of units of institutions.

One more sequential type of genre organisation is genre hierarchy, which, according to Swales (ibid: 13-14), implies ordering different genres in the order of importance and prestige, 'their perceived quality differences and rankings' (ibid 2004:18) determined by interdiscursive processes. The ranking may alter in various spheres and geographical locations. According to Swales and Feak (ibid), genre hierarchies, chains, sets and systems form and organic network of genre constellations.

Supplementing Spinuzzi's (2004) table with Swales' and Bhatia's typologies, i.e. genre chains, hierarchies and constellations, the characteristics that may be applicable are presented in Tab. 2:

## IV. Professional communication

Y. Kuzmina

	Genre chains	Genre hierarchies	Genre constellations
<b>Perspective</b>	Communitarian/ chronological	Communitarian/ dominant	Activity
<b>Model of action</b>	Communicative	Communicative/ performative	Mediatory
<b>Agency</b>	Asymmetrical	Asymmetrical	Symmetrical
<b>Relationship between genres</b>	Sequential	Sequential and overlapping	Overlapping/ intermediary
<b>Foregrounded genres</b>	Official (stabilized)	Official (stabilized)	Unofficial (dynamic) and official (stabilized)

Table 2: The Comparison of Genre Constellations (compiled by the author)

As it can be seen from Table 4 above, genre constellations (Swales 2004) and genre ecologies (Spinuzzi 2004) possess identical characteristics and may be used interchangeably, whereas other typologies cannot since they actualise diverse analytical perspectives, e.g. chronological and sequential organisation of genres (chains), dominance (hierarchies), individual requirements (sets), communicative purposes (colonies) etc.

To summarise, in this research genre is approached as a mediatory tool to reflect the practices of discourse community. Since the activities that are reflected in genres are complex, genres are also reflected as a complex system with various relations, i.e. sequential, overlapping, dominating etc. Genres change in accordance with the communicative needs of the discourse community and are viewed as dynamic rhetorical forms.

### 2. Empirical results and discussion

The results of the interviews revealed that depending on the (field) domain and communicative aims, the documentation is subdivided into four streams, namely, quality assurance, project management, technical operational and business operational (administrative). Office operational documentation has been eliminated from the present study since its creation is determined by local legislation (e.g. job descriptions, labour contracts, invoices, Second Level Agreements (SLA) etc) and office management operations, but professional discursive processes govern the creation of technical operational, project management and are influenced by quality assurance domain documentation.

Category	Activity	Example
Sequential	Rank according to chronological sequence	A test case is tested, a bug is identified and a problem report is written.
Hierarchical	Rank according to significance/ from general to particular	Specifications, configuration management plan and test strategy are subordinated to operational architecture
Transformational	Transfer information of one genre into the other	A business solution is outlined in a business case and business requirements and then converted by a business analyst, software architect and project manager into a technical solution presented in the form of operational architecture, system, functional and non-functional requirements

Table 3: Coding relations between genres

## IV. Professional communication

Y. Kuzmina

As it was described above, the data from the protocol sheets were first grouped according to the domain or sub-domain it belonged to, i.e. software development, testing, business analysis, project management, quality assurance, forming genre repertoire with further gradual retrieval after coding. First, genres were coded in interview protocol field notes, using the interviews to identify genres. A genre was codified if it was mentioned by at least two professionals. The genre was further verified when a textual artefact was submitted to the corpus. The coding of genre relations is outlined in Tab. 3.

Tab. 4 illustrates the organisation of the genres in the sample into a repertoire (Bhatia 2004) based on the discursive practices/ activities and communicative aims and ecology (Spinuzzi&Zachry 2000) or constellations (Swales 2004) based on their mediational relations, the outline being the same.

Characterising genre repertoire, it takes the perspective of the discourse community, thus, being communitarian. The networks of genres model action as communication, possessing performative character, hence, the model of action is communicative/ performative. The relationships are initiated by the discourse community, thus, being asymmetrical. The genres in the columns are organised chronologically into chains, the relations being sequential and hierarchies, the relations being dominant. The overlapping relations or relations between the domains are marked with arrows and are of a transformational character, namely the source genre is reconceptualised and modified into a target genre. The system as a genre repertoire is considered to be stabilised for now.

Investigating the network as genre ecology, it takes the perspective of the professional activity, thus, the model of action being mediatory. New activities can result in the emergence or elimination of genres, thus, the relationships are intermediary/ overlapping. The network deals with agency symmetrically (with individuals and genres mutually controlling, guiding, and mediating each other). The genre ecology is considered to be dynamic, for instance, in some projects automated testing is performed (activity), therefore test cases are not generated by test engineers, but by the testing tool (having a different rhetorical organisation and linguistic content), if at all. It provides an example how an activity may influence the process of genre creation or elimination. The results have been summarized in Tab.4.

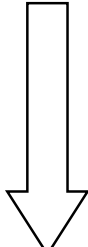
Genre Chains and Genre Hierarchies  	Quality Assurance	Project Management	Technical Operational
	quality policy	business case description business requirements	operational architecture systems requirements
	quality manual		functional and non-functional specifications
	quality procedures		test strategy test cases problem/bug report or change request
	assessor's report	a project plan project plan (project scope, project schedule, change management plan, resource, financial, quality, risk and acceptance plans)	configuration management plan repositories configuration
	certificate	status reports	reports on fixes
		a closure report	Manuals
		an acceptance act/note	

Table 4: Genre ecology of the participants in the sample

### 3. Conclusions

To summarise, genre constellation or genre ecology in IT comprise four domains, i.e. technical operational, project management, quality assurance and business operational, the first three being crucial for the present study. Genre ecology is devised underlying sequential, hierarchical and transformational relations. Genre recontextualisation is observed between the domains (e.g. in case of business case and business requirements transformation into operational architecture and system requirements). All the genres in the network across the domain share four common communicative aims, i.e. to regulate and guide the professional activity; to inform about a professional activity, system, product, application; to report progress of a professional activity; to verify/ evaluate the compliance a professional activity, system, product, application to certain requirements.

No changes have been observed in the quality assurance section since the aim of this domain is to set guidelines for quality managers. The dynamism might be observed in the new versions of standards published with minor amendments. In the project management domain the genre dynamism depends on the size of the project, i.e. the bigger the project, the more consistent the documentation set. In smaller projects some subgenres of the project plan may be merged. Technical operational set has demonstrated the highest degree of dynamism, especially if the company implements agile project management and software development to speed up the process of software delivery to production environment or uses some automated tools. Then the documentation is generated automatically (e.g. test cases and defect reports) by the system.

### 4. Acknowledgements



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## IV. Professional communication

Y. Kuzmina

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