CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This is a study on the executive secretary in the business environment seen in the light of genre as a social process. The business environment refers to the formal setting of the business organization where individuals are concerned with attainment of organizational goals. The business organizations are either product oriented, or service oriented companies. The study involves a close and detailed investigation of talk interactions engaged in by the executive secretary. These talk interactions, recognized as speech events, deal with particular business matters in naturally occurring circumstances.

The study considers factors which contribute to the holistic interpretation of speech events. It draws on the relationship between talk and social structure. This is based on the premise that language is not an ensemble of linguistic features alone, but that it is dependent on, or influenced by, the social structure. The social structure, influencing the production and creation of language, involves the social situation, the company culture, the job functions, the knowledge and skills of the staff concerned, as well as the expectations regarding their roles.

The genres which evolve out of the speech events, provide a context for discussion to clarify the social processes of the roles and role relationships of the

executive secretary. They hinge on realizing the practical goals of the daily work activities of the executive secretary. The distinctiveness of genre analysis in this study lies in the insights it yields on the role and status of the executive secretary in the business organization. Analyzing talk in the business environment reflects the inter-relatedness of linguistic phenomena and sociological considerations.

The study develops by exploring the formal-informal paradox of face-to-face interactions in the office settings of the executive secretary. In the business environment, there is a diversity of speech events in the various settings, especially as it relates to the job functions of the executive secretary. The analysis of such empirically determined data is an attempt to enable comparative perspectives to shed light on the range of sociological and linguistic connections in the production of language. The aim is to convey an interpretation of language use to depict what language can do in terms of social action as agreed upon by genre analysts.

The analytical perspective of this study involves the convergence of language in context with an emerging model for analysis to investigate the dynamic features of social action. The model developed for this study is based on an integrated approach involving the social structure, the sociocognitive and sociolinguistic features. The details are given in Chapter 2.

As an ethnographic study, it takes into account the descriptions surrounding the speech events. This concerns the office setting of the executive secretary, a room

adjoining that of the chief executive officer (CEO). Much of the data is drawn from this setting where the talk interactions of the executive secretary occur with the head of the organization, the company staff or with external contacts. The details are discussed in Chapter 4.

The specific objectives of the study are given below :

(i) To identify the types and purposes of the talk interactions so as to provide the name recognition of the genres;

(ii) To evaluate the genre status of the speech events of the executive secretary in the different business organizations;

(iii) To investigate the functions of genre to explain the patterns of role and role relationships of executive secretaries in the business environment;

(iv) To analyze genres as a social process, given the ethnographic descriptions within which talk occurs, to explain the formal-informal paradox to interpret language as social action in terms of getting things done.

1.2 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The focus of this study is on the talk interactions between the executive secretary and those whom she comes face-to-face with in the office setting. This is the only level of communication where what she says and how she says it reflects her role. Written communication is based on the instructions from the boss and, therefore, do not exhibit her role as clearly as is the case with direct face-to-face encounters.

There is a volume of telephone talk as she spends at least two or three hours of her working day receiving or making telephone calls. However, such communication could not be used as data since it was not possible to hear or to record the other participant's talk in the telephone exchange.

The study involves four companies varying in size and type of business undertaken. They afforded opportunities for observing at least four executive secretaries at work. Four different settings provided the potential for studying recurring phenomena to investigate to what extent the work observed served as typifications of her job functions. Such empirical data is valuable in providing clarity on the role of the executive secretary in the current business environment.

However, there were limitations. One limitation that emerged at the outset of this study has to do with access to the office of the executive secretary. Her level of work involves a high degree of confidentiality. Therefore, there was considerable resistance to the idea of the researcher being present to observe and to take audio-recordings. Four companies, however, agreed to accommodate the researcher to a certain extent. This was possible only through contacts. The researcher had to rely on these contacts with the CEO or the executive secretary to get them to allow her to gather data on their premises.

The second limitation arose from the hectic work schedule of the executive secretary. This affected the time and duration of observations. The researcher

had to take into account the urgency, the volume, and the nature of tasks undertaken by the executive secretary in drawing up her observation schedule.

The third limitation stems from the second. It was not always possible to know beforehand what interactions would take place. Who walks in, when, and why, depended to a certain extent on the executive secretary. Hence, the collection of data was based on the flow of events.

1.3   SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first in depth study on the role of the executive secretary in relation to genre as a social process. The executive secretary has a pivotal role in the business organization, being the main link in a chain of operations in any organization. She is the only person in the company who has to know everything concerning her boss and that necessarily means about the organization as well. This places a premium on her knowledge and skills and on her ability to communicate effectively and efficiently. A study on the role and functions of the executive secretary is likely to be of interest to scholars and practitioners interested in genres and social processes in the business environment.

The Professional Secretary International (1992) defines the executive secretary as an executive assistant who

- possesses a mastery of office skills;
- demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility with direct supervision;

- exercises initiative and judgement; and

- makes decisions within the scope of assigned authority.

These duties have important implications for organizational communication. The effective and appropriate use of language is seen as central to her dynamic role. The outcome of this study may be significant for two reasons. First, it may give rise to new perceptions regarding the role and professional status of the executive secretary. Next, the insights from this study may also have a bearing on the training programmes for executive secretaries in future.

1.4 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The theoretical perspective is based on the concept of genre as a tool for analysis and interpretations of social processes. It draws on systemic thinking and the notion of language as social semiotic to illustrate the dynamic nature of genres in talk interactions.

The theoretical framework refers to the increasing concern for an inter-disciplinary approach in language research so as to provide more holistic and meaningful interpretations of language use. The basic precepts of ethnography and structuration theory contribute to the understanding of genre as a social process. The details are given in Chapter 2.

1.5   METHODOLOGY

The research in this study involved gaining access to the business organizations to gather information and to observe the institutional processes of role-based activities of executive secretaries. The methods employed relied on two principal approaches, namely ethnographic observations, and direct audio-recordings.

There were two phases of research. The first phase was a pilot study based on an interview schedule as the means for data collection.   There were twelve secretaries who participated in the preliminary round of face-to-face interviews. Out of the twelve, four were willing to proceed to more in depth research. The executive secretaries worked in four different types of companies :

Company A - A large public utility company

Company B - A large multinational company

Company C - A medium sized local subsidiary company (the parent
                         company is in the United Kingdom)

Company D - A small, recently set up management consultancy

The second phase involved the following :

(i)   Face-to-face interviews with CEOs, executive secretaries and the specialist
         informants;

(ii)   periods of on-site observations of role-related and task-related activities of
         the executive secretaries;

(iii)   recording of field notes by maintaining an activity diary;

(iv) direct audio-recordings of the face-to-face talk interactions of executive secretaries with their bosses, the company staff and the external contacts.

Most of the audio-recordings were in the office setting of the executive secretary. Some audio-recordings were undertaken outside the office setting. This meant accompanying the executive secretary to locations where she held meetings with external business contacts.

All the audio-recordings of face-to-face talk interactions were transcribed using the standard transcript notations (See Appendix 1). Based on the observation schedule and the flow of events, a total number of eleven interactions were recorded. Where possible the researcher tried to elicit additional background information surrounding the talk interaction during the interviews.

In the interests of validity and reliability in data collection, investigative and methodological triangulation was carried out. Every effort was made to gather data by different methods and from different sources. This allowed for a higher level of theoretical and data sensitivities, thereby enhancing the qualitative interpretations. The details are given in Chapter 3.

The next chapter deals with the details of the theoretical framework.