

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study is an attempt to expand the scope of genre as an analytical tool which links sociological considerations with linguistic phenomena (See 2.4). Genre is perceived as a whole system (See 2.9) enabling a holistic interpretation of language to redefine the role of the executive secretary in the business organization. The generalizations are drawn from the 'small phenomena' of talk interactions in Chapter 5 grounded in the ethnographic descriptions presented in Chapter 4.

A distinctive feature which has emerged in the study, is the 'formal-informal' paradox intricately enmeshed in the social process of the talk interactions of executive secretaries. The formal aspects emerge as the substantive features of the social structure of business organizations while the informal aspect of cognition and linguistics reflect the volatile elements of the talk interactions (See 2.5, 2.8). The talk configurations manifest the genres that have evolved in the various episodes of social action as 'constitutive' of the formal features and 'generative' as of informal features (See 2.7).

The interdependence of the formal and informal characteristics evident in the study, demonstrates that social structure and human action are not separate (See 2.6.3). They involve an integration of social structure, cognitive convictions and linguistic phenomena which shape genre as a goal oriented activity (See 5.3.9.5.1). Talk in this study illustrates genre as a social process in getting things done or doing things with words (See 2.2). It gives genre its role defining facility.

The expansion of genre as a social process indicates the formal and informal aspects as revealed in the model for analysis. They shape the broad conclusions concerning the executive secretary in the business organization.

The formal aspects of social structure pertain to organizational hierarchy, organizational goals and technological change (See Chapter 4). The informal aspects deal with human interactions and the culture at the work place (See Chapter 5). The study reveals that the significance of genre lies in its duality as the medium and outcome of the 'formal-informal' dynamic encounter which parallels the contextual and interactional aspects of the talk interaction (See 5.3.9.5.2). It has emerged that these have implications for the relationship between the executive secretary and the boss, company staff and external contacts.

To obtain clarity, and to understand the relationship displayed in the genre, the researcher discusses the perspectives drawn from the data on the fusion of the

formal and informal features grouped under the headings of 'Relationship' and 'Job Exigencies'. The discussion focuses on the elements of relationship namely power differentials, social cohesion and authority and on the elements of the job exigencies namely accountability and efficiency. These are significant considerations extrapolated from this study. The attention given to these several considerations are determined by the evidence gleaned from the data which support the generalizations.

6.2 RELATIONSHIP

6.2.1 Power Differentials

In the organizational hierarchy, the boss who is either the CEO or the MD is number one. He is therefore accountable for the achievement of the company goals. The goals set the direction for all ensuing plans, policies and activities of the company.

The genres that have evolved, showed that at this top level of the organizational hierarchy, the executive secretary is an 'executing partner' aligned with her boss. Her loyalty and commitment to the boss is an unwritten law in the 'modes operandi' between the boss and the executive secretary. The 'boss-executive secretary' unit is an integral part of the business organization reflecting a 'symbiotic synchrony' which does not exist in any other boss-employee relationship in the company (See 5.2.5).

It is apparent from the analysis of the data that there is a shared genre knowledge and situated cognition which drive the decisions evident in the genres (See 5.2.3). Her position as executive secretary demands she be a 'knowledge worker'. It is therefore not uncommon that she sometimes knows more than the boss in some matters because of her long service in the organization and also because she is equipped with updated information on everything that is going on in the company (See 5.2.5).

For these reasons, the question of power and dominance that have emerged in the analysis, display certain particularities in the genres between the boss and the executive secretary. The sociolinguistic features of the genre confirm the boss as number one. He inevitably wields power. However, the particularity lies in the relationship which exhibits a partnership (See 5.2.8, 5.2.9.4). The partnership thrives on an implicit understanding which mitigates any mismatch between what is said and what is understood. The nature of the relationship which centres on loyalty and openness dispels any potential for hidden agendas (See 5.2.6; 5.3.6; 5.4.6).

What seems to have surfaced in the genre analysis, is a boss-executive secretary relationship operating at two levels. The first is at the level where the boss is in control. It is a superior-subordinate relationship (See 5.2.8). She has to follow his instructions. The second is at the "partnership" level where the boss and executive-secretary function as a team. There is an unseen 'equality' in the

encounter reflecting support and cooperation (See 5.2.7). Neither of them is concerned as to who is in control of the genre since that is already understood.

Confidentiality is intrinsic to her job function. Besides the boss, she is the only other employee in the company who knows everything that is going on. But there is an inverse relationship of power and knowledge (See 5.2.9.4). The furthest she can apply that privilege is by assisting to supporting the boss, and to a lesser extent, by exerting some influence on decision making.

The genre between the boss and the executive secretary confirms that language in the context of the formal business environment is not only an external relationship between language and society but an internal dialectical relationship (See 2.9.1.2). The data shows the deeper sociological considerations alluded to which underlie what is said and how it is said. It is evident from the genre analysis that, regardless of the level of responsibility, knowledge, and confidentiality, the acknowledged position of power remains with the boss.

In the genres that have evolved between the executive secretary and the company staff, there are several discernible features which set the relationship apart from the other inter-staff relationships.

Theoretically, all company staff are employees of the company with the related responsibilities. However, three particularities specific to the position of executive

secretary account for power differentials. Firstly, placed at the top level of the organization and located apart from the other levels of management the executive secretary is visibly aligned with the head of the business system (See 4.1.1.3). The office of the CEO or the MD which includes the executive secretary, is always perceived as a unit and vice versa. Her responsibilities depict 'management' because she has to execute the tasks assigned to her by the boss. She shoulders an array of urgent and important responsibilities pertaining to all company matters as they are the concern of the boss (See Appendix 3). This unique feature of 'management' (See Appendix 7) bestows upon her an unsolicited sense of power which is recognized by all company staff (See 5.3.8). She, therefore, exerts some influence in dealings with company staff. The power differential lies in the inherent contradiction of a 'powerless power' where independent of the boss she would have no power. The study shows that it is the responsibility of supporting and assisting the boss which illustrates the power differential between the executive secretary and other company staff.

Secondly, all company staff are aware that she is the only person who has access to all information. Her role dictates the need to know everything that is going on in the company (See 4.1.1.2.2). As such she has to manage information sharing discreetly. In the interactions with company staff she is seen to be alert in giving and receiving information to enable appropriate decisions to be made (See 5.3.2). Although she is a company employee like the other company staff, the executive secretary demonstrates power by her prerogative as 'head of information'. This

contradiction is reflected in the genres where she influences decisions while being engaged in a seemingly friendly and casual interaction.

A third aspect which evokes power is the confidentiality she has to maintain since she is a source of all information. She does not divulge what she knows to company staff except on a need-to-know basis. In that capacity, it has emerged that the staff rely on her to give approvals or to make decisions because they may not know what she knows. Peer friendship or the spirit of camaraderie and cooperation in the relationship with company staff has no influence in breaking the code of confidentiality. Despite the warm, friendly and casual interaction, there is evidence of an unobtrusive social distance between the executive secretary and company staff. The staff exhibit a sense of caution in dealing with the executive secretary because she is connected to the seat of power (See 5.4.7). Her close working relationship with the boss signals the power differential with company staff.

In the case of external contacts, most of the interactional genres have to do with business negotiations. These are motivated by the specific objectives of a transaction where the executive secretary is a client representing the organization. There is, therefore, no overt evidence of a power differential in these situations. The only sense of power, where that may exist, is being assertive as a client with the external contacts, who themselves represent their organization.

The evolving genre text on 'collaboration' and 'management' (See Appendix 10) display polite management of talk where neither interactant is seen to be dominant. Instead they engage in tactful negotiations to accomplish objectives which hinge on the rights and responsibility towards the organization they represent.

6.2.2 Social Cohesion

A factor that evokes social cohesion is the shared responsibility in the attainment of organizational goals. Each of the business organizations is driven by the set of company goals (See 4.1.1.1.1). To accomplish the goals, organizations have established procedures delegated to employees at their various levels and functions (See 2.9.1.1). Genres evolved out of talk interactions with executive secretaries, reflect the micro level procedural goals as a means towards the achievement of the systems goal (See 2.9.1.2). The common focus creates a culture of cohesion and solidarity between the executive secretary and the boss and the company staff.

In the case of external contacts, the concern with maintaining social cohesion is less significant as they are not driven by common goals. In these circumstances, the executive secretary is seen to demonstrate tact and hospitality to maintain a cordial relationship rather than aspire for solidarity.

The long service of executive secretaries either with the same boss or in the same company, accounts for the genre knowledge and situated cognition which pervade all genres. Her knowledge and experience give rise to a 'dependency' that all interactants have towards her. It is evident from the study that the boss relies on her for support and assistance; the company staff rely on her for direction and approval and the external contacts depend on her to clinch a business transaction. In all cases, they elicit her cooperation which sustains social cohesion. In all genres with company staff and external contacts, their dependency allows her the 'final say' (See 5.3.4). This adds social value to her position as the executive secretary.

Underlying social cohesion, there appears to be varying degrees of intimacy involved in the relationship with the executive secretary. They account for caution apparent in the genres with the boss. In the case of company staff and external contacts, it is her role as executive secretary working closely with the boss that accounts for their caution. In the relationship with the boss a high degree of intimacy dictated by her job function does not preclude social distance as he is the head of the organization. For the same reason, there is an inevitable social distance apparent with company staff and external contacts (See 5.3.9.2).

6.2.3 Authority

Authority is a regular feature endemic in organizational relations. It is usually based on the position held and the sanctions inherent in that position in the

organizational hierarchy (See 2.9.1.2). In the case of the executive secretary she has no line of authority in the organizational chart. Nonetheless, she is a person with authority which is not legitimized by her position (See 5.3.9.1).

The reason for this is her occupational competence which comes from her knowledge and experience. These are reflected in the genres (See Chapter 5) in achieving procedural goals (See 2.9.1.1).

In the relationship with the boss, both parties acknowledge the superior-subordinate relations. But the boss is aware that it is the executive secretary who gets the job done. It is to his advantage to secure her active cooperation to achieve organizational goals. In the relationship with the company staff and external contacts her competence combined with the close link with the head of the organization, assigns her functional authority (See 5.3.4). The functional authority of competence resides in her experience, knowledge and skills (See 5.3.9.4). These account for her wide range of responsibilities.

6.2.4 Technology

Technology has had a significant impact on the duties and responsibilities of the executive secretary. Technology has freed her from the 'time-trap' to enable her to handle routine activities and more. In the case of the large companies A and B, executive secretaries have assistants who manage the routine tasks while she manages more demanding responsibilities.

As an executive secretary she is the key personnel responsible for accessing all the technology capabilities to manage her office at the head of the organization. In the office the juggling of tasks using the capabilities of the computer, the facsimile and the telephone (See 5.2, 5.3, 5.4) exhibits the variety in her work. She is not just a data entry personnel.

Technology has created demanding work as in editing and storing data, preparing salaries and budgets, processing contracts, and designing and developing visuals and graphics for presentations (See Appendix 3). She has, therefore, to handle sophisticated responsibilities which make her work atmosphere less structured. That is to say, she makes the time to be part of a team in the interactions with the boss, the company staff and the external contacts.

Technology has contributed to a volume of information flow which she has to manage by selecting, sorting, distributing and utilizing when the need arises. In the case of the larger companies A and B, the executive secretary is required to provide information to the boss and company staff to enable them to perform their tasks efficiently. These include writing speeches and doing company reports.

In general, the advent of technology has stimulated innovation in the business practices, thus, posing new challenges for the executive secretary. She is compelled to move away from the 'tunnel view' of mundane duties to broader and

more engaging horizons where she is continually upgrading her knowledge and skills to stay on the 'cutting edge'.

6.3 JOB EXIGENCIES

The two primary factors which underscore the job functions of the executive secretary are accountability and efficiency. Accountability places a premium on her being a knowledge-worker and decision-maker. Efficiency is perceived as speed and skill in discharging her duties, and her ability to balance the significance of formal structure with informal casual talk while keeping in view the shared goal residing in the genre.

6.3.1 Accountability

Being in the office unit of the head of the organization, she automatically inherits demanding responsibilities. The CEO and the MD are accountable for the plans, policies, procedures and regulations that drive the organization to attain its goals. She provides the support, assistance, and service to help ensure that the organizational accountability by the boss is met. Being a knowledge-worker is a value-added attribute (See 4.1.1.2.1) that makes her almost indispensable. Her breadth of knowledge cuts across all levels of interactions (See 5.3.4).

Her sense of accountability emerges in the speech acts with the boss, company staff and external contacts to meet the procedural goals. (See Appendix 8 - 10).

There are several speech acts which reflect the accountability (See Appendix 11) of the executive secretary in accomplishing the tasks which indicate the way things are done (See 2.9.3.5.1). They illustrate accountability in what she says and how.

A greater frequency of accountability is evident in the interactions with company staff and others (See 5.3.4), compared to the interaction with the boss as in A1, B1 and D2. It reveals that decision making, when it lies with the boss, alleviates the severity of her responsibility (See 5.3.4.1). The opposite happens with the others when all decisions are entirely her responsibility. The speech acts which she engages in illustrate her awareness of accountability at the level of meeting procedural goals (See Appendix 11).

6.3.2 Efficiency

Speed is a necessary attribute to juggle several tasks at once while remaining alert (See 5.2, 5.3, 5.4). There is always more than one job to do. Speed is important because of the several areas of responsibility that come under the executive secretary's authority. (See Appendix 3). They vary from the daily routine tasks, to an array of both urgent and more sophisticated work. Speed is apparent in the immediacy of 'action' as in 'approvals', 'enquiry' and 'decisions' which constitute the genre.

Speed in processing and disseminating information and instruction is vital to her role. In the genres involving the boss and the company staff there is a sense of

speed so that the interactants can carry on with other duties and tasks (See 5.3.9.5.3). Technology has further stressed speed and increased the volume of business transactions. Executive secretaries assume other functions such as organizing campaigns, seminars and conferences while the bosses pay attention to a diversified range of responsibilities.

Linguistically, the awareness of speed is subtle and surfaces in the continuous sequential organization of turns. There are few instances of untimed pauses or delays in turn taking. The back channel cues indicate listenership in the listener-speaker coordination and the markers depict the rhythmic flow of turns (See 5.2.9.5, 5.3.9.5, 5.4.9.5).

The absence of pleasantries governed by 'salutations or modals initiating formality as in 'would you mind', 'may I', or 'could we' signal an intuitively observable sense of urgency. The response to the executive secretary in the rule-governed activity of talk behaviour indicates a clear focus on the shared goal. The uninterrupted focus suggests an implicit recognition of speed and urgency in the work of the executive secretary (See 5.2.9, 5.3.9, 5.4.9).

The skill in juggling several responsibilities in the achievement of goals suggests a need for 'balance'. The ability to manage social structures and social relations demonstrates the link between transactional and interactional talk. On the one hand, the executive secretary has to maintain an alertness to keep the formal

organizational goals in view. On the other, she has to maintain positive and friendly relations to elicit cooperation in decision making or to carry out the boss's instructions. This is evident in the turns reflecting style shifting, code switching and lexical choice. The fusion of transactional and interactional talk is a striking feature of 'balance' in genre episodes involving the executive secretary and the boss, the company staff and external contacts.

Balance is also evident in her relationship with the boss. She has to know when to 'let go' acknowledging that the boss is always number one and when to 'hold on' where her support is needed. To maintain that balance she oscillates from her occupational function as secretary to being a team player.

Prioritizing tasks and accomplishing them by the efficient utilization of time is another profound feature of balance. The efficiency of the executive secretary lies in the quick execution of routine tasks and the instructions given by the boss. Then she balances the computer-based documentation, technology-based communication, and the face-to-face encounters within the mandatory working hours. (See Appendix 3). The pace of work is apparent in that, in most cases, she works through lunch or stays on beyond working hours. Finding a perfect balance of tasks and time seems to be an ongoing challenge.

6.4 SHARED SOCIAL REALITY

The notion of a shared social reality in this study is a pertinent one (See 2.6). It influences the patterns that emerge addressing the question as to 'who is the executive secretary?'. All the talk interactions A1 to K (See Chapter 5) evolve by the rule-governed activity of linguistic symbols. The aim is to accomplish shared goals revealed in the genre episodes (See 5.3.9.1). The incomplete or incoherent turns in the speech acts are therefore not significant. Situated meaning governed by purpose transcends the problem of incomplete of utterances (See 2.5). Some relevant aspects of shared social reality in the context of this study include the phenomena of intersubjectivity, the 'duality of social structure' and 'social institution'.

The phenomena of intersubjectivity is at the core of the genre affecting the responses and conduct of the executive secretary (See 2.9.2.1). It has a direct bearing on the observable confidence level of the executive secretary. Her confidence cuts across all her responsibilities and social obligations as an executive secretary. Her decision making (See 5.3.7) authority rendered by her confidence is revealed in the genres 'scheduling', 'policy', 'collaboration' and 'management'. They endorse the relevance of intersubjectivity in analyzing social processes.

The relevance of the 'duality of structure' concept is evident in the enacting of roles and behaviour of the executive secretary (See 2.6.3). It reflects the influence

of social structure on human action. She functions as manager, decision-maker, team player, organizer, and public relations officer. (See Appendix 3). The recurring pattern of these multiple roles creates her task environment (See 2.8.1). The pattern of multiple roles shapes social structure in the sense of maintaining organizational hierarchy and ensuring technological advancement. This duality of structure influences the creation and production of genre.

The recurring patterns of multiple roles and their corresponding patterns of talk in the genres place them as 'typifications' (See Appendix 8 – 10). These typifications viewed as social institutions become 'institutionalized' (See 2.6.3). This means the role of the executive secretary is one with features which survive time. 'Institutionalisation' then illustrates the way in which social processes involving thought, word and action take on status. Consequently, 'institutionalization' transfers to the new breed of upcoming secretaries the acquired roles and patterns of behaviour. This human construction of behaviour apparent in the talk genres is then the basis for social action illustrating doing things with words. Since genre has to do with social processes of human action which are unique from moment to moment, (See 2.9.2) they are a product of stability by virtue of patterned roles and behaviour, and a product of change by virtue of the rule-governed activity of talk which are never identical in any interaction (See 2.9.2.1). Genre as a social process then serves as an analytical tool to know who the executive secretary is in the business organization. The

assumptions, the expectations and the culture pertaining to her role, emerge in this study.

6.5 IMAGE

Significant perspectives have emerged from this study and they are summarized below.

The executive secretary has power in terms of a functional authority. It is not power legitimized by her position. She is empowered to make decisions and act independently based on being connected to the head of the organization.

She reveals integrity by her high level of confidence and confidentiality. She is seen to be a person to reckon with in the organization and is not regarded as just another employee. In that sense she has a unique position.

She wields respect and self-esteem by her level of knowledge, sense of accountability and marked efficiency in her role as executive secretary. All participants treat her with caution in spite of familiarity and friendship.

She projects a sense of sacrifice and understanding by her willingness to give priority to her job functions, seen in her loyalty and commitment to the boss. All other personal or family interests seem to take second place. This is apparent in her long hours of work without additional remuneration.

Her close proximity to the power head of the organization and her multiple roles as manager of information, administrator, public relations officer, organizer and team player which includes networking, affords her a high visibility. However, she has to manage that visibility by keeping a low profile since her boss is always 'number one'.

6.6 PROFESSIONALISM

Is the executive secretary a professional in the light of the foregoing discussion? With reference to the criteria to be a professional (See 2.9.1.2), a clear cut affirmation or denial does not seem possible. Firstly, it is apparent that an executive secretary is equipped with a variety of skills which she applies with competence and efficiency. Her wealth of experience and store of knowledge and information accounts for this competence. This is evident in her management of several job functions implying multiple roles. The mastery of skills, the assumed responsibilities and the assigned authority cannot be argued (See 1.3). However, her concerns are on organizational and procedural matters that do not impinge on a 'specialist' area of responsibility (See 2.9.1.1). The matter of a 'specialized' competence does not arise given the nature of her duties and responsibilities.

Secondly, although she has the assigned authority to carry out independent work, her level of autonomy lies in procedural matters (See 2.9.1.2). At higher levels of responsibility where the boss is in charge of significant decision making she demonstrates a support role. Being a knowledge-worker is an asset which allows

her to function independently but that does not give her total autonomy nor total power as she is at all times accountable to her boss.

If being professional is seen in the light of the criteria mentioned earlier (See 2.9.1.2), then the executive secretary may not acquire a professional status. But remaining on the cutting edge by her own growth and development in her career she can demonstrate the qualities of 'professionalism' in her role as executive secretary. To keep pace with the advancement in business in a technological world, the boss needs someone who is more than an executive secretary. She may then assume a different name for her occupation such as an 'Executive Assistant'.

6.7 TRAINING

The study demonstrates specific areas of training which go beyond the general office and management skills, effective communication skills and public relations. At the organization level, she has to stage herself as a 'consultant' in the sense that she is a referral point for all employees at all levels and for external contacts. Her acquisition of knowledge has therefore got to be an ongoing process to meet the business challenge and to be an indispensable team player in decision making. She has to have a passion for knowledge and information.

At the interactional level, public relations is a norm for the executive secretary. But she has to stage herself as a 'psychologist' in the sense that she has to be both intuitive and perceptive to be discerning about shared goals in the interaction and to sense hidden agendas. These insights are assets in the management and

evaluation of talk interactions and human relations so as to be one step ahead when dealing with people in and out of the organization.

Both these qualities of the executive secretary form the basis of genre knowledge and situated cognition which govern 'who says what to whom and why' (See 2.9.3.4). The executive secretary then functions with value-added attributes of integrity and marked respect.

Finally, the training curricula should include skills for teamwork, conflict resolution, and problem solving for the adept management of the flow of information. The technological revolution has created new challenges she has to face with new demands on her job functions.

6.8 CONCLUSION

This study "Genre in Social Process: The Executive Secretary in the Business Environment" has been a modest effort to provide insights into the holistic interpretation of language. It has, however, been a formidable task both at the empirical level as well as at the complex analytical level where language is perceived to be context-sensitive and content-sensitive. It is hoped that this study would serve as a lead for further research that would draw linguistics into the realm of the social sciences.