

Genres of receptionist / guest interaction in the hotel industry

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Abstract: This article presents a research on guest reception in the hotel industry. Two basic frameworks have been considered in this work: Swales' socio-rhetorical approach (1990, 1992, 1998, 2004) and the concepts of activity and genre systems developed by Bazerman (1994, 2005). The discussion carried out in this paper focuses on a four-star executive hotel located in the city center of Florianópolis (SC, Brazil). An interview with the hotel manager and a review of the relevant literature are used to analyze the hotel discourse community and to survey the activities and genres of the hotels lobbies.

Keywords: genre; social activity; client reception; hotel.

Resumo: Este artigo traz o relato de uma pesquisa sobre a recepção ao hóspede no setor hoteleiro. Dois quadros teóricos são considerados nesse trabalho: a abordagem sócio-retórica de Swales (1990, 1992, 1998, 2004) e os conceitos de sistemas de atividades e gêneros desenvolvidos por Bazerman (1994, 2005). A discussão desenvolvida neste artigo toma por base um hotel executivo de quatro estrelas localizado no centro da cidade de Florianópolis (SC, Brasil). A partir de entrevista com a gerência do hotel pesquisado e de dados da literatura da área, é realizada uma análise da comunidade discursiva hoteleira e um levantamento das atividades e dos gêneros da recepção em hotéis.

Palavras-chave: gênero textual; atividade social; atendimento ao cliente; hotel.

¹ The present article results from a research study supported by FAPESC (Fundação de Apoio à Pesquisa Científica e Tecnológica do Estado de Santa Catarina). This paper was presented at the 3rd DICOEN (International Conference on Discourse, Communication and the Enterprise), which took place at PUC-RIO, Rio de Janeiro, in 2005.

INTRODUCTION

The studies of the relations between language and work are relatively recent, so that the main aspects of the debate are still centralized around the construction of research objects and methodology (NARROUDINE, 2002). The present article intends to contribute for this debate, focusing on the genres and the practices² of a specific work environment, the hotel.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the role genre plays in hotel practices, considering firstly an overview of the hotel as a whole and then a specific department, the hotel lobby. Thereby, the first aim is to investigate the hierarchy of job positions within the hotel by applying the concept of discourse community (SWALES, 1990, 1992). The second aim is to survey the practices and genres involved in the receptionist/guest interaction, considering in this case the concept of genre systems (BAZERMAN, 1994).

There are two reasons which justify the choice of the hotel language as the focus of this research. First, it is necessary to consider that tourism is the main industry in the city where the data were collected: Florianópolis, SC, Brazil. In applied terms, therefore, the research shows advantages in the sense that it can produce critical reflections on the hotel services offered in this city.

The second justification is of a more theoretical nature. Genre studies are quite developed in the academic environment (SWALES, 2004), but in relation to other professional environments there are still not so many research results.

By describing the activities and genres of hotel attendance, it is also possible to raise and reflect on problem-situations, some of which have already been described in the literature. Lamprecht and Ricci (1997), e. g., described several situations during which they faced problems as guests; Brownell (2004) described inter-hierarchical communication-problems; Guerrier and Adib (2004) discussed several interaction problem-issues in hotel attendance (focusing on the employee, and not on the guest), among them the issues of emotional work, ethnic and gender problems, and inappropriate requests.

This article is organized in the following sections: a) the theories and concepts taken as basis for the research; b) the project methodology and the data that will be considered for this article; and c) an exploratory survey of the hotel discourse community and its genres, giving emphasis to the genres and activities of lobby attendance.

2 In this article, the terms “practice” and “activity” are used indistinctly.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In theoretical terms, two basic frameworks are considered in this work: Swales' socio-rhetorical approach (1990, 1992, 1998, 2004) and the concepts of activity and genre systems developed by Bazerman (1994, 2005). Both authors accept Miller's (1984) view of genre as a form of social action.

Swales (1990) conceives a genre as a set of elements that carry out a "communicative event" in a given social environment or discourse community (from now on, DC). According to this author, a genre: a) is a class of communicative events; b) is triggered by specific communicative purposes; c) functions in a prototypical way in relation to its exemplars; d) has a proper logic in relation to content arrangement and formal aspects; and e) presents a specific (or fuzzy) name in the community.

For Swales (1990), genres are carried out in a DC and constitute the cultural repertoire that characterizes it. The DC can be defined as a group of people committed to the accomplishment of one or more shared purposes, so that such purposes constitute the conducting and unchaining wire of the activities and of the communicative events carried out by its members.

The author (1990) also uses a set of features to characterize a DC, in the sense that it possesses: a) objectives to accomplish (sometimes, under dispute); b) mechanisms for intercommunication; c) participatory mechanisms; d) its own genres, or genres which have been appropriated from other communities; e) its own terminology; and f) an explicit or implicit hierarchy.

Bazerman (1994, 2005), in turn, beyond this relation of affiliation to a DC, considers that genres must be studied as constituted by and constitutive of social routines. In this way, a specific genre (e. g., a patent) is characterized by its bordering relations with the other genres (laws of patents, terms of concession, etc.) necessary to the accomplishment of a certain social activity (e.g. a patent application). As such, these systems "[...] are interrelated genres that interact with each other in specific settings" (BAZERMAN, 1994, p. 97). He goes on to say that: "[o]nly a limited range of genres may appropriately follow another in particular settings, because the felicity conditions for the actions of each genre presuppose the existence of various states of affairs" (1994, p. 98).

Bazerman's proposal is being considered here as complementary to those of Swales, since the data for the present research are being studied from the DC to the systems of activities and genres carried out within this community. It is necessary to add, however, that Swales himself, in his more recent works (1998, 2004), is already in that direction, also accept-

ing, in this latest book, the term “genre chains” as one of the perspectives from which to look at the object. Differently from genre hierarchies, sets and networks, in the case of the chains what is on focus is the chronological ordering of activities and genres.

METHODOLOGY

This research on hotel genres is part of a wider project that also tried to observe the discourses which circulate in hotels (power and identity relations). The project was developed at the University of Southern Santa Catarina (UNISUL), between 2005 and 2007, under the name “Discursive practices of the hotel industry”, and included the participation of another researcher (FIGUEIREDO, 2005).

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The research reported in this paper consists of a case study. As Leffa (2006, p. 20) says: “[a] case study is the deep and exhausting inquiry of a participant or small group. We try to investigate everything that is possible to know about the individual or chosen group and all that we consider relevant for the research”. According to the same author (2006, p. 23-24), this type of study can fit into three categories: a) exploratory (testing the project guiding questions as a kind of pilot study); b) descriptive (showing the reality as it is); and c) explanatory (trying to describe reality in terms of relations of cause and effect).

Here, the case is being studied from a descriptive perspective. An ethnography perspective is also being applied to it, since I have considered the environment in its daily social accomplishment and data proceedings from observation, recordings and interviews. Specifically in this study of the hotel genres the following aspects are being examined:

- 1) The discourse community: aspects related to its organization, participants, processes and procedural manuals, genres, etc.; and
- 2) The systems of activities and genres of customer attendance at the hotel lobby: in terms of the routines usually carried out in this sector.

As one can see in Nouroudine’s (2002) article, there are three ways to focus on language in professional environments: a) language *as* work (an integral part of the activity); b) language *about* work (rules, conventions, debate forums); and c) language *at* work (parallel to the professional activity and shaped in an informal/private way). In the present research the two first focuses are being adopted.

Let us look at the case under study now. The hotel under analysis is a four-stars executive hotel located in the center of the city (from now on, Hotel X). It belongs to a pool of investors and is managed by a hotel management company. All the staff is employed by the pool of investors,

except the manager, who works for the management company.

In the next two sections, I analyze the hotel discourse community and the genres of reception services. The analysis involves the literature from the lodging field and an interview with the manager of Hotel X which took place at the hotel itself.

THE HOTEL DISCOURSE COMMUNITY: LITERATURE AND CASE STUDY DATA

For an initial reflection on the hotel's DC, two Brazilian hotel textbooks were selected (CASTELLI, 1992; MARQUES, 2000). Both textbooks present a similar organization (Table 1). In general terms, they cover the following contents: a) the administration (finances, tax obligations, marketing, etc.); b) task organization (lobby services, stewarding, restaurant, etc.); and c) special procedures (advice on what to do in case of a fire, communication problems, reservation problems, training, etc.).

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Table 1: Themes in two hotel textbooks

<i>Marques (2000)</i>	<i>Castelli (1992)</i>
Administration	I - The art of management
Commerce	Human capital
Communication	Human organizations
Emergency	Management for total quality
Engineering	Administration services
Management	II - Operationalization
Computing	Food and beverages
Operation (food and beverage)	Room services
Lodging	Bar
Quality	Stewarding
Human resources	Human resources administration
Security	Marketing

When we look to the hotel management textbooks from the perspective of the DC characterization criteria (according to Swales, 1990), we can observe the presence of all the typical DC features in the hotel community (Table 2). The community members are joined together by a shared objective: to give lodging services. In addition, other objectives can be observed in these manuals such as the attempt to create a feeling of fidelity with the guest, which is considered done when the services rendered fulfill (or surpass) the customer's expectations. It is important to notice here that, even though shared objectives do exist, they are not constructed in a collective way, but delegated to the different members (in accordance with their functions).

Table 2: The characteristics of a hotel discourse community according to the literature

Goals	To give lodging services To create a feeling of fidelity in the guest To give information
Mechanisms of intercommunication	Meetings, boards, internal communications
Participatory mechanisms	Salary, tips, manager feedback, manuals of processes and procedures, hotel textbooks
Genres	Booking, checking in, checking out
Terminology	No-show, twin, suite, half-pension, lobby, etc.
Hierarchy	Manager, assisting managers, attendants, door-keeper, messenger, steward, guard

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The second characteristic (to have mechanisms of intercommunication) is verified in the existence of meetings, boards, internal communications. These mechanisms are, in a certain way, common to all companies.

Here we can say that the participatory mechanisms in the hotel environment (used to signal to each member if he/she is acting in accordance with the community's expectations, maintaining beliefs and/or to produce innovations) present some specificity. There are basically two feedback mechanisms, the salary rates and the tips, both distributed in accordance with the members' hierarchy. Some employees are paid a fixed salary while others complement their wages with tips. In these books there is also an emphasis on the importance of manager feedback about the employees' performance in the distinct functions. Mechanisms of *maintenance and change of sets of beliefs* can also be seen in this DC. The specific internal manuals that organize processes and procedures, and the training related to them, are the most characteristic objects regarding this aspect of the hotel DC. However, the hotel management textbooks can also be seen as performing such functions.

In relation to genre as a category, it is also possible to understand that some genres are characteristic of this DC. We can immediately notice, in these textbooks, the importance attributed to genres such as "checking in" and "checking out". Although checking in exists in other social environments (as in airports), in the case of hotels it presents specific activities and language rituals.

Another characteristic of a DC pointed out by Swales (1990) is the existence of its own terminology. In relation to the hotel DC, there is a clearly visible specific lexicon. In the hotel literature we find terms like "no show"

(when a customer reserves a room but does not show up), “twin” (an apartment for two people), “suite” (apartments with living rooms), “half-pension” (a daily rate which includes one of the main meals), etc.

The last characteristic to be considered is the existence of a hierarchy. This aspect can also be verified in the hotel DC. The hierarchy is constituted in two ways. The first is the distributions of the functions itself. The posts go from manager to assisting managers and attendants to stewards and guards (among others), which compose the basis of this DC’s social pyramid. As one perceives in the textbooks, the hotels also present well defined sectors (human resources, lodging, food and beverages, and stewarding). In this way, the hotel DC’s hierarchy is divided into several sub-hierarchies, what also gives rise, in this sense, to subcommunities.

In relation to the hierarchy, three aspects are prominent: promotion, the value of experience and guest participation. Promotion occurs by means of moving a member of the DC to a higher position, and some posts are more open to promotion. As Barrington (2004, p. 77) points out:

Some jobs in a hotel are understood as steps for promotion while others are considered the end of the line. Some managers of great hotel chains started in the front desk, an area that seems to function as a bridge to other departments such as food & beverages.³

One of the aspects most emphasized by Swales (1990) in relation to belonging to a DC is experience. In the case of the hotel DC it is also seen as important, but it is closely connected to the time one remains in a given function. According to Barrington (2004, p. 77):

The age of the individual does not necessarily lead to respect. Somebody who is considered young and inexperienced can be treated with the same level of respect as someone who is considered older and who should possibly have been encouraged to move forward a long time ago.⁴

3 We didn’t have access to the original paper in English. The passage in Portuguese is as follow: “Alguns empregos em um hotel são entendidos como degraus para avanço enquanto outros são considerados fim de linha. Alguns gerentes de grandes cadeias hoteleiras começaram na recepção que parece oferecer uma ponte para outros departamentos tais como alimentos & bebidas”.

4 “A idade do indivíduo não necessariamente conduz ao respeito. Alguém que é considerado jovem e inexperiente pode ter o mesmo nível de respeito de alguém que é considerado mais velho e possivelmente deveria ter sido encorajado para outras posições muito tempo atrás”.

An aspect that is not contemplated by Swales (1990, 1992) in his conceptualization of DC is the participation of occasional members. In the communities analyzed by the author, the members are permanent and present a homogeneous pertaining status, differing only in relation to the degree of maturity (and, therefore, in hierarchical levels). In terms of the hotel DC, we have to consider the guests as peripheral members whose participation occurs more due to their familiarity with hotel practices than to their effective involvement with the institution. Considering the notion of a core center of the DC (the management, the philosophy and the tradition of the hotel), the guest assumes not the role of agent but the role of recipient of the action. However, even as an object of the action, the guest is active and exerts considerable influence on the behaviors of central members.

In terms of Hotel X (our case study), the first observations already point out to some peculiarities in the organization of its DC (Table 3). First, it is important to notice that, due to the fact that hotels managed by corporations are a relatively new trend in Brazil, where hotels were traditionally family businesses, we see here a division of schools of thought. Hotel X, in this sense, aims at offering what they call “a differentiated service”. This was strongly emphasized by the manager during the interview.

Table 3: The characteristics of the specific discourse community studied (based on field observations and interview with hotel manager)

Goals	To give lodging and leisure services according to a new logic (that of the management company)
Mechanisms of intercommunication	[no information obtained]
Participatory mechanisms	Pin of decoration
Genres	[no information obtained]
Terminology	Guides of behavior (three steps rule)
Hierarchy	Investors, management company, manager, assistant managers, attendants, door-keeper, messenger, steward, etc.

Another relevant aspect is a specific mechanism of participation created by the hotel. As individual members excel in their functions, they are decorated with a distinction pin. This makes the other members aware of the most experienced ones and, therefore, most likely to go up in the hierarchy.

Besides its function as a feedback, this pin also represents one of the belief-maintenance mechanisms which are registered in a processes and procedures manual. One of the rules of this guide, as signaled by the manager, is that “all guest must be greeted if he/she comes within three steps from an employee”.

The top of Hotel X’s hierarchy is occupied by two systems of power (the investors and the management company); in a similar vein, its logic of professional promotion is also differentiated in comparison to more traditional Brazilian hotels. It is the management company that conducts the promotions, and the employees seen as most experienced can be hired by this higher sanctum (to take part in the management company staff).

In general terms, what we see in the hotel DC is a rigid social structure with little room for individual creativity. Its organizational structure is quite different if compared with the academic DC (one of the most studied). While in the latter there is an attempt to bring members to an equal status, in the former, due to its own nature, work positions are already marked and promotion to the top of the hierarchy will always be a privilege of just a few.

GENRES AND ACTIVITIES OF HOTEL RECEPTION SERVICE: LITERATURE AND CASE STUDY DATA

For an initial reflection on the activities and genres of guest reception, we also take here, as starting point, two textbooks about front desk services (DI MURO PÉREZ, 1999; VIERA; CÂNDIDO, 2002) and a general hotel management textbook (DUARTE, 1996).

When consulting Duarte’s book (1996), we can have a clear notion, from the list of front desk activities, of which genres (in bold) are involved in the function of guest reception. According to the author, these activities are the following:

- 1) Guest registration (**check in**);
- 2) Sales to passing guests (**walk in**);
- 3) Emission of **acknowledgment of guest entrance**;
- 4) Emission of **acknowledgment of guest exit**;
- 5) To fill in the **hotel’s occupation bulletin**;
- 6) To fill in the **nocturnal report of front desk**;
- 7) Change of guest apartment, through the **controll-card of guest change**;
- 8) Emission of the a **daily list of guests**;
- 9) Closing the account (**check out**);

10) To pass information for the cashier (**opening of a folio for the apartment's bill of expenditures**).

We notice here, in the parts in boldface, that each activity possibly corresponds to a genre⁵ and that there are systems of activities and genres at the lobby sector, since these activities are chained and we can even see, in item 10, the relationship with another sector (the cashier / finances). The guest also has to fill an obligatory document (the Guest Register National Card / Ficha Nacional de Registro de Hóspede - FNRH).

Di Muro Pérez (1999) and Viera and Cândido (2002) present lists of activities related to checking in (Table 4). It is possible to perceive, mainly in the list presented in the right column, that checking in constitutes an oral (conversational) genre. Differently from the left column, where we have just a list of non-sequential check in activities, in the right column we find steps that usually compose the conversation which characteristically constitutes the check in.

The genre "checking in" is tentatively described in an article by Cardoso (2003). In order to carry out an English teaching activity with hotel professionals, she appeals to three movie scenes (from *Bagdad Cafe*, *Duets* and *Home Alone 2*) to describe this genre. In this explanation, the genre is composed of the following stages (CARDOSO, 2003, p. 151):

- 1) Greeting and offering aid;
- 2) Guest indicates that he/she has a reservation or manifest the intention of staying at the hotel;
- 3) Attendant confirms the reservation or gives information on vacancies, excusing him/herself if necessary;
- 4) Receptionist enquires about the form of payment;
- 5) Receptionist delivers the keys;
- 6) Receptionist lets the guest know if there is a porter to carry the luggage.

Even though my paper presents only a preliminary investigation of the check in as a genre, it allows us to perceive an innovation, in relation to Cardoso's research, regarding the front desk activities and genres in the hotel under study. The manager informed us that, because the guests rarely fill in the service evaluation cards, the front desk employees are expected to write down the comments they hear during the service.

5 It is necessary to notice here that some of these activities and genres may have fallen in disuse due to the automatization of the hotel sector after 1996 (publication year of the book).

Table 4: The check in activities in hotels

<i>Di Muro Pérez (1999)</i>	<i>Viera and Cândido (2002)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To update the situation of the rooms in the rack of apartments; • To check vacancies; • To receive the guest with or without a reservation; • To receive individual guests and groups; • To control vouchers; • To check reservations; • To offer room options; • To give special discounts; • To offer other services; • To register the guest in an individual card; • To control identity documents; • To guarantee the stay; • To distribute the rooms; • To register the guest in the book of entrances and exits; • To give instructions to the uniformed staff; • To accomodate the guest; • To communicate checkings in to all the involved sectors; • To intervene in special situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To attend the guest, kindly greeting him/her; • To identify if he/she has a reservation or not; • To deliver the Guest Register National Card - GRNC- guiding the guest to fill in it; • To check the information in the GRNC; • To fill in the identification card and to deliver it to the guest; • To deliver the key of the apartment to the messenger; • To give some additional information to the guest; • To greet the guest, wishing him/her a good stay at the hotel; • [After the guest leaves the balcony] To enter the guest's information into the system, in case of a computerized system, or to open the invoice of debits, in case of an electromechanical system, or another kind of system.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I carried out, by means of a survey of the relevant literature and some preliminary data from the case under study, an exploratory analysis of the hotel DC and of the activities and genres of guest reception in hotels. Even though what is reported here is not a profound study on the language and genres of the context of hotels, hopefully it opens windows to reflect on this issue.

In general terms, the themes discussed here lead to two specific concluding remarks. Firstly, it is possible to notice that the concept of discourse community is productive to understand hotels, especially to understand the way language participates in hotel organizations and practices. The second remark is that the work in the hotel lobby seems to be accomplished essentially as a system of activities and genres, and that understanding this relationship is essential to think critically about the work, the teaching and the improvement of attendance services, and also to think about possibilities of empowerment of professionals in this area.

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Recebido em 31 mar. 2010 / Aprovado em 30 ago. 2010