

THE TEXTUAL ORGANIZING OF PROFESSIONS THROUGH GENRES AT THE FRENCH MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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INTRODUCTION

In this case study, based on archival data from the French diplomatic archives, I have analysed the emergence and change of the genre repertoire at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in the contemporary period (1979-1999), a period of professionalization of diplomacy, and of the irruption of technology in organizing diplomatic work.

A genre of organizational communication is “a typified communicative action in response to a recurrent situation”, and “the resulting genre is characterized by substance and form.” (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992:301-2) An example is the managerial memo (Yates, 1989). The study of genres in occupational communities and in organizations, drawing from sociolinguistics, shows that members of a community routinely enact genres, which taken together, form a “genre repertoire” (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994: 542). Coordination and collaboration processes in organizations, which use interdependent genres enacted in typical sequences, form “genre systems” (Yates & Orlikowski, 2002:15). Genres systems “structure expectations about the purpose, content, participants, form, time, and location of communicative interaction among members of a community.” (Yates & Orlikowski, 2002:31) The study of genres, genre repertoires and genre systems in occupational communities, professions, and organizations opens new avenues of inquiry in the sociology of work and occupations.

I suggest studying the routine enactment of genres in an occupational community which has for a long time been understudied: diplomats. Diplomats conduct and execute foreign policy as formulated by governments (Roberts, 2009). This is an important analytical distinction. While governments are elected and change, State diplomats are a stable occupational community which interacts with the global diplomatic community. This has led the diplomatic studies community to hypothesize that diplomats form a distinct occupational community across States (Sharp, 1999).

In France, diplomats typically do not transition to careers outside of the diplomatic community; moreover there are few political appointments (Lequesne, 2017). Drawing from diplomatic studies, and the political sociology of international relations, I suggest that French diplomats are in fact a profession i.e., a social community with a common identity, status, values, role definitions, language, and power over its members, limits, and a selection and socialization process.

By conceptually separating the profession from its home organization, I suggest that organizational scholars could study further power relations in a mutually dependent relationship. A professional diplomat is recognized as such as it represents a polity and negotiates on its behalf (Neumann, 2012:94), while a polity relies on the professional expertise and body of knowledge of diplomats to conduct their international relations. Therefore, this creates an opportunity to study organizational practices, such as communicative practices, as negotiated arenas. In the following sections of this paper I present an abridged summary of the findings. I

show how genre structuring emerged in the earlier period (1979-1980), and by focusing on one episode of a genre as a negotiated arena (1993-1995), with the diplomatic cable genre.

GENRE STRUCTURING AND THE MFA'S SEARCH FOR EFFICIENCY

In order to ensure efficient coordination in the global French diplomatic network, the secretary general who is the highest level of management at the administrative level within the MFA, circulates a memo ("circulaire") which calls for the structuring of diplomatic correspondence in 1979:

"The conduct of foreign policy cannot be conceived without an efficient system of information gathering and treatment. However, I have noticed that the circulation of information within the central administration is not satisfactory: slowness of diffusion, obturation of policy conception echelons, absence of liaisons between services, are unfortunately all too frequent phenomena. The improvement of information circulation within the Department [i.e. the MFA's central administration services in Paris] is therefore a permanent objective." (Secretary General memo, October, 29th 1979, translation)

This memo starts a wave of genre structuring i.e., deliberate actions to create, reinforce or change genre norms that is shared expectations of form and / or of substance (Yates, Orlikowski & Okamura, 1999). New genres emerge and are systematized at the organization-level: the daily information bulletin and the official bulletin of the Department (1979). While the first genre is a synthesis of the relevant political information for analysis and decision-making, the second contains the legal and administrative rules and regulations applying to the MFA and its personnel. I describe the first one, as it is an organizational communication innovation. A new "operating cell" within what is now the directorate for communication and press is created in the end of 1979. Its role is to gather, analyse and synthesize daily and weekly foreign press. This is done in order to provide the policy and geographical directorates in Paris an operative synthesis of foreign press articles, as opposed to the traditional daily local press briefings written by the embassies for their own consumption. There are also forms of structuring of existing genres, such as the diplomatic note, to reduce local variations and rationalize the circulation of information within the central administration in Paris, by enforcing genre norms at the diplomatic network level (1979-1980).

Second, existing genres are explicitly structured, such as the form of diplomatic notes, at the end of 1979. The upper part of the note, which contains the elements necessary (sender, receiver for action, receivers for information in copy) for the circulation of the diplomatic note, is explicitly codified to reduce variation (due to implicit local genre norms) and increase efficiency, "so as to rationalize the circulation of such documents" (Secretary General memo, October, 29th 1979, translation). Such notes are, as of the end of 1979, gathered and made available for a year by the documentation directorate so that all services within the central administration can review them. This social and material practice provides the "scaffolding" (Orlikowski, 2005) of diplomatic work by creating a temporary (notes are kept for a year) distributed memory within the Department.

This first period shows the role of explicit genre structuring and its role in changing the genre repertoire by not only changing genre norms (such as the structuring of the diplomatic note or the diffusion across services) but by creating new organizational genres to respond to recurrent needs to conduct diplomatic work. Such needs include access to the relevant legal (official bulletin of the Department) and political (the daily information bulletin) information.

While this first wave of explicit genre repertoire structuring is adopted to facilitate coordination across services, the question of coordination between diplomatic posts abroad and the central administration services in Paris remains. The MFA forms a committee to address this in 1979, and draws conclusions from a series of meetings with Ambassadors. In 1980, the Minister argues that “a more active participation of diplomatic posts to the work of reflection and proposals of the central administration, and the transfer from the latter to the former would reinforce further the efficiency of our diplomatic apparatus” (note from the Minister, March 31st 1980, translation). This has led to several changes in the genre repertoire (genre norms and expectations), tensions between conflicting genre norms and expectations, and to the emergence of a genre system.

The Minister, in order to increase the participation of diplomatic posts to high-level policy work, structures a genre norm –the policy brief- as he associates the ambassadors to the preparation of his international situation briefing at the weekly council of Ministers where the French President is present. In addition to increasing coordination, this genre norm valorises the work of ambassadors abroad.

This valorisation is also found in many other instances, such as the explicit structuring of the “dossier” genre used in official visits of government representatives abroad, as the Minister closely associates the Ambassadors to the preparation of the dossier. This dossier genre is a social and material practice which provides the scaffolding (Orlikowski, 2005) of the government knowledgeability of a given polity (actors, relationships, networks, policy issues, context, undergoing negotiations, etc.) at a given time.

Finally, the Minister explicit structures substantive norms by enforcing the separation in diplomatic cables between information and commentary, valuing the latter over the former: “Diplomatic posts do not have to compete with news agencies in transmitting raw information. (...) Diplomatic correspondence must distinguish information from commentary. Its main interest lies in the light given to events by diplomatic posts.” (Note from the Minister, March 31st 1980)

However, a tension between genre norms and expectations appears as of 1980 onwards. It must be placed in the broader context of the computerization of the diplomatic network, which is starting to reduce transmission costs, and has led to an increase of diplomatic cables being sent from diplomatic posts to the Department. While the genre norms are explicitly structured to valorise the political analyses of ambassadors, ambassadors are asked to reduce the volume of their diplomatic correspondence and to reduce the length of their diplomatic cables: “For the diplomatic correspondence to be read with the desired level of attention, they [diplomatic posts] will address brief and less numerous diplomatic cables. A cable, regardless of its origin, should only be over four pages in particularly outstanding circumstances.” (Note from the Minister, March 31st 1980) Throughout the rest of this chapter I focus on a case of a genre as a negotiated arena.

GENRES AS NEGOTIATED ARENAS

The diplomatic cable

Ambassadors abroad produce political analysis for decision-making at the policy-making level, via the diplomatic cable genre. As a privileged mean of communication between ambassadors and policy-makers, the volume of diplomatic cables, and their length, became as of 1980 a topic of contention. Such contention lies between ambassadors on the one hand, and the Secretary General and the Communication and Information Systems Directorate –CSID- on the

other hand. The latter positioned itself in 1991 as having the monopoly of expert knowledge in organizing expert knowledge (third blueprint on computer and communications, CISD, 1991), as it possesses the necessary knowledge on rationalizing the production, treatment, and storage of information through technological means. Given that they possess, in effect, superior knowledge of technology as the computerization movement has accelerated and become more sophisticated, this monopoly is uncontested at the Department.

The consequence of this shift in mandate and methods translates into calling for the Department's explicit structuring of genre system, and of genre norms:

“This analysis in terms of clients, production and results has never been done in the Department. This explains the inflation of the number of diplomatic cables going through the diplomatic communications network. In effect, producing information implies clarifying the nature of information, its typing and structuration, the choice of medium according to its mode of transportation, the mode of transportation given security constraints, the diffusion and distribution [of information], its treatment (where, who, how, for whom, ...), its archiving, the access to archiving, the updating [of information] (creation, modification deletion), ...” (third blueprint on computer and communications, CISD, 1991, translation, page 4).

Two years later, the publication by the Committee on the role and the functioning of the MFA (led by Jean Picq) of the “Recommendations for the reform of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs” puts diplomatic correspondence, and the diplomatic cable, at the centre stage.

In 1993, the MFA starts a series of organization-wide consultations to reform its organization. Jean Picq presides the Commission on the role and the functioning of the MFA, mandated to reform the organization. During these consultations, some of the central administration services are to send a written note on specific areas which will be added to the final Picq report. The CISD is in charge of reporting on diplomatic correspondence, and sends a note on May 24th 1993, which argues that there are too many diplomatic cables: “the uncontrolled generalization of the diplomatic cable use has for corollary the absence of hierarchizing of its content and of its form” (note from the CISD on diplomatic correspondence, May 24th 1993, translation, page 1), and asks for a hierarchy of genres, since “the interesting diplomatic cable may remain unnoticed among the flux of routine cables” (*ibid.*, translation, page 1). The explicit structuring of the genre repertoire by instating a hierarchy between the “routine cable” and “the interesting cable” is a turning point for the profession.

Besides, the CISD argues that “the interesting information or remark may escape the reader's attention if, as it is often the case, the cable is too long. The detailed cable is certainly useful for the desk officer or for the managing director. But the upper echelons of the hierarchy are deprived of the synthesis they would have needed” (*ibid.*, translation, page 1).

The explicit structuring of a genre norm i.e., the length of the cable (the form) shapes the perception, which will dominate, that the higher in the chain of command (Secretary General, cabinet, Minister of Foreign Affairs, government, President) a cable goes, the shorter it must be. As a consequence only shorter cables reach the upper echelons. In essence, synthesis becomes a synonym for access to upper echelons.

As a result of the CISD note, the Picq report is published in June, 30th 1993 and explicitly structures the genre repertoire overall and an explicit hierarchy of genres between “the diplomatic cable”, “the telegraphic dispatch”, “the interpersonal telegraphic message”, and “the diplomatic dispatch” (Picq report, June 30th 1993, page 22, translation).

The diplomatic cable is “destined to be read by the Minister and the highest authorities in the State, it personally engages the responsibility of the chief of the diplomatic post, who is the sole signatory. It comprises an analysis deemed to be very important, suggests a policy or requests an instruction. (...) It does not go beyond two pages; a summary always precedes it if it does not fit in one [recto-verso] page.” (Picq report, June 30th 1993, page 22, translation)

The telegraphic dispatch is “the normal instrument of communication between the intermediate levels of hierarchy. In the current system, these telegrams constitute the main part of the transmissions, but are not exploited to their full potential. The telegraphic dispatch bears the double signature, from its writer and the chief of the diplomatic posts.” (Picq report, June 30th 1993, page 22, translation)

The interpersonal telegraphic dispatch “forms essentially today the largest part of “administrative distributions” that manage the details of the life of the diplomatic posts. (...) This new instrument would also allow services and diplomatic posts to communicate informally, fast and confidentially on issues...” (Picq report, June 30th 1993, page 22, translation)

The diplomatic dispatch is “in its classic sense, not only kept but revitalized. It is regardless of whether in-depth studies, sometimes very voluminous, are being read by one desk officer at the Department. What is essential is that they allow the diplomatic posts to deepen their knowledge of the country of residence; because they incentivize diplomats to leave their chancellery, to circulate and multiply their contacts. Dispatches [in-depth studies], indirectly, enrich the cables.” (Picq report, June 30th 1993, page 22, translation)

This explicit structuring of the genre repertoire provides the organization a genre taxonomy, while enforcing the recommendations from the CISD on diplomatic correspondence from its note in May 24th 1993 i.e., the hierarchy of genres between what the Picq report classifies as the “very important”, “the normal”, “the administrative”, and the “in-depth studies”. The hierarchizing of genres in the genre repertoire becomes an area of negotiation as of 1993, with the issue of the labelling urgency and diffusion.

Following the Picq report (June 30th 1993), the Secretary General sends a series of diplomatic cables to enforce the explicit structuring of genre norms and of the new genre repertoire (November, 24th 1993). A reading committee, composed of managing directors from the central administration of the MFA in Paris (including of the Diplomatic Archives) is set up to enforce in particular two explicit genre norms: the systematic use of the summary, and the use of the “immediate” label. Cables are sent with a label for organizing the distribution speed, whether “routine” (mostly for administrative purposes), “urgent”, or “immediate”. The label “immediate” means, in practice, that at any time the highest levels of the chain of command must receive the cable and be informed immediately.

The reading committee, between 1993 and 1996, enforces such explicit genre norms by sending “reminder” cables to the diplomatic posts who have either not systematically used the summary section of the diplomatic cable, and those who have, at any given time, used the “immediate” label liberally when sending a diplomatic cable, as most cables were classified as “urgent” anyway (about ten percent as immediate, seventy percent as urgent, and twenty percent as routine according to the diplomatic cable number 2021 from the Secretary General sent on January 20th 1995).

As the Secretary General reminds all of the agents in this cable, “confusion has widespread between the importance of the topic being discussed or of the information being transmitted and the level of urgency of its transmission and of its diffusion in the relevant services. However, these are two different criteria.” (ibid.) The “routine” label for distribution is contested by

diplomats themselves. An example is from a note sent by the deputy managing director of a geographic directorate (and former ambassador) to the Secretary General, suggesting substituting the term “routine” with “normal” in January 1995:

“The word routine is loaded with negative connotations: “the habit of acting or thinking always the same way, with something mechanical or thoughtless to it.” This term refers (...), by extension, to the notion of traditionalism, whose antonyms are initiative and innovation. Another word could advantageously replace it: normal, whose definition seems to me to go in the direction, set by the note from the Secretary General, “which serves as rule, as model, as reference.” This term refers to the notion of norm, applicable to “what is deprived of an exceptional character”, or yet again to “what is conforming to the most frequent types.””

This shows that part of the diplomats’ professional identity is tied to how they conceive diplomatic work as symbolically separate from administrative work, and that a tacit hierarchy of meanings associated with categories of genre norms, e.g. the temporal organizing through level of urgency, exists, in addition to the explicitly structured hierarchy of genres in the new genre repertoire. The reading committee is also set up to manage the written production of the diplomatic posts, and the production of diplomatic posts is monitored through prescriptive statistics (number of cables sent per diplomatic post and norm-enforcing written feedback). This shows that implicit local genre rules remain, which confirms that there is a tension between implicit local genre norms and explicit structuring of genre norms, the former “operate tacitly, through socialized or habitual use of communicative form and substance” (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992:303), while the latter requires explicit deliberation and action on genre norms (Yates, Orlikowski & Okamura, 1999).

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

This example extracted from the full paper shows that a genre, such as the diplomatic cable, is an arena for negotiations between different groups. While ambassadors as a profession associate diplomatic work with, in addition to political representation and negotiation, producing political analysis for decision-making at the policy making level, the Secretary General views its role as managing upward information flows (hence the issue of network-level diplomatic correspondence volume, and the need for a synthesis as a norm in the cable genre), and the CSID enforces genre norms and views its role as shaping and enforcing the genre taxonomy, drawing its legitimacy from a monopoly of expertise on technology. There is a tension between the professional group of diplomats and the organizational goals with its increasing search for efficiency through genres structuring, and the enforcing of new genres taxonomy.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR