

Syracuse University

**SURFACE**

---

School of Information Studies - Faculty  
Scholarship

School of Information Studies (iSchool)

---

1-1-2011

## Theorizing Embodied Communicative Organizing: Fleshing out Genre with Goffman's Situational View

JoAnn Brooks  
*Syracuse University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/istpub>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#), [Organizational Communication Commons](#), [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Science and Technology Studies Commons](#), [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brooks, JoAnn, "Theorizing Embodied Communicative Organizing: Fleshing out Genre with Goffman's Situational View" (2011). *School of Information Studies - Faculty Scholarship*. 86.  
<https://surface.syr.edu/istpub/86>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Information Studies (iSchool) at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Information Studies - Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact [surface@syr.edu](mailto:surface@syr.edu).

# THEORIZING EMBODIED COMMUNICATIVE ORGANIZING: FLESHING OUT GENRE WITH GOFFMAN'S SITUATIONAL VIEW

JO ANN BROOKS

[jbrooks@umich.edu](mailto:jbrooks@umich.edu)

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is central to organizational processes (Orlikowski & Yates 1994; Putnam & Nicotera 2009; Schall 1983: 560; Weick 1987: 97-98), yet the material basis underlying social practices of communication – and their relation to organizing processes – is not well understood (Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren 2009). This paper focuses the study of communicative organizing processes on human bodies and affords promise for theorizing the sociomaterial basis of communication and of organizing processes more generally. I do this by augmenting Yates & Orlikowski's (1992) genre approach with a materially-embodied perspective on non-verbal communicative organizing – Goffman's (1963) situational view of social interaction. Results contribute to knowledge in the areas of materiality and organizing, communication and organizing, and the study of embodied social practices across levels of analysis.

## LITERATURE

Yates & Orlikowski's communicative genre approach for analyzing organizational communication processes defines genre as "typified communicative action invoked in response to socially recognized recurrent situations" (Yates & Orlikowski 1992). The approach is a robust analytical tool for studying relationships between communicative practices and differences in meso-level organizing processes (Im, Yates & Orlikowski 2005; Orlikowski & Yates 1994; Yates & Orlikowski 2002a, 2002b, 2007; Yates, Orlikowski & Jackson 2008; Yates, Orlikowski & Okamura 1999). Yet the genre approach is not well developed for analyzing the material basis of communication *per se*, and it retains a view of enactment as a singular *event* rather than as a materially-grounded process or performance. This limitation can be traced to the lack of a materially-grounded definition of "communicative action" – a term at the root of the genre definition.

To flesh out the genre approach to communication and organizing – with a materially-grounded perspective – this paper addresses the questions: *How is it possible to define communicative action in embodied, material terms that account for the relationship between embodied communicative practices and material properties of artifacts? And How does such an extension to Yates & Orlikowski's genre approach contribute to materially-grounded analysis of communicative organizing practices?*

## THEORY DEVELOPMENT: THE SITUATIONAL VIEW OF GENRE

Placing human bodies and their communicative action at the center of analysis offers the advantage of addressing both halves of the "socio-material" theme in tandem. It establishes a clear ontology and preserves the agency of human actors. The best starting place for the endeavor is to focus on co-present genre.

Work on co-present social interaction by Erving Goffman and his intellectual descendents affords a solid foundation for the endeavor. Goffman's (1963) situational view of social interaction highlights nonverbal (embodied) and relational aspects of interaction among co-present human agents, taking into account material properties of artifactual objects as well. Goffman defines a "situation" as "the full spatial environment" within which two or more persons in co-presence are able to mutually monitor each other (1963:18). He draws a distinction between "merely situated" activities – i.e. those that could occur just as well outside a situation as within one – and those parts of situated activity that are "intrinsically dependent on the conditions that prevail within [a situation]." The latter corresponds to his definition of the "situational" aspects of activity. He illustrates with a pointed example: "The risk to one's body when one is being robbed at gunpoint of household effects is *situational*; the loss of effects ... is *merely-situated*" (1963: 22, emphasis added).

I leverage Goffman's and related views of social interaction, providing a "situational view" of the genre approach, in three main sections corresponding to aspects of Yates & Orlikowski's definition of genre: "typified communicative action invoked in response to socially recognized recurrent situations" (Yates & Orlikowski 1992; Orlikowski & Yates 1994).

### **Situational View of Communicative Action**

"Communicative action" is at the core of Yates & Orlikowski's definition of genre. The term "action" generally presupposes the existence of an embodied agent and implies a noticeable change of state in that agent – such as movement or vocalization – expressing the agent's intent to create some kind of effect. The situational view of action is grounded in the observation that people generally organize their bodies in *space* to enable and constrain their ability to perform specific actions (Goffman 1963; Kendon 1985). Enablement and constraint of bodily actions is hierarchically organized from the ground up, so that one cannot lower one's trunk onto a chair until one's legs are in front of it, cannot turn the head beyond the limits imposed by the trunk, and cannot shift the gaze beyond the periphery of the head's orientation (Schefflen 1964). Furthermore, these constraints support observers' inferences about what the actor might or might not do next.

**Involvement.** Goffman (1963) notes that due to the physiology of human bodies, their spatial-orientational position is normally expressive of their attentional and emotional engagement. His term *involvement* denotes this engrossment – the extent to which an individual is engrossed in an activity (1963: 36). He also notes that because of the integrity between involvement and spatial-orientational positioning, a person's spatial-orientational positioning is communicative of that person's involvement. He stresses (1959: 2-3) that in co-present situations – where it is possible for participants to mutually monitor each other – participants' nonverbal (i.e. bodily) behavior has a dual nature, i.e. it is expressive *and* it is communicative. This integrity between an actor's spatial-orientational positioning and their involvement commonly is revealed in phrases such as "laid back," "staring at someone (or something)," "sitting on the edge of one's seat," "craning the neck" to see, etc. Inferences about other actors' cognitive and emotional involvement are crucial for communication because no one person can materially "get inside another's head;" communication success ultimately depends upon observation, inference and interpretation by another participant.

**Action.** An *action* entails a noticeable shift or sharp contrast in the actor's orientation, position, or other state (such as speaking or being quiet), and generally indicates the

beginning/ending of a different activity such as turning around, starting to walk, sitting down, pointing, beginning to speak, etc. Actions therefore generally comprise transitions between spatial-orientational positions or other bodily states. When coupled with common knowledge of the hierarchical constraints upon “next actions” from any particular spatial orientational position, observation of a person’s current spatial-orientational position and actions supports inferences about the observed person’s possible or likely next actions and consequently their intent as well. By observing changes in another person’s spatial-orientational positioning, one can often not only identify that other person’s current involvement, but also infer their intent and likely or possible next action(s).<sup>1</sup>

**Markers.** Discontinuous bodily action (movement), with sharp contrasts in locus of activity and focus of attention, signaling a change in that actor’s focus and intent, are often noticed by co-present others. Sharp contrasts in posture, orientation or position (or vocalization), are noticeable and attract attention, they “mark the natural divisions in a behavioral stream” (Schefflen 1964: 324), and is thus termed a *marker*. A marker both delimits a communicative act, and directs attention to possibilities for next action(s), cueing inferences about one another’s intent and possible/likely next steps. In addition to attracting attention to the shift in posture, orientation and/or position, such bodily changes also draw attention to whatever actions may come next (Schefflen 1964: 324).

**Organizing Focused Interaction.** For participants in situations of co-presence to engage in shared activity – whether for conversation or more extensive collaborative work, they must establish a single, shared (common) focus of attention and locus of activity. Establishing such “focused interaction” in which participants are “openly cooperating” with each other (Goffman 1963: 24) requires participants to repeatedly coordinate their actions. This is necessary of course because no one person can materially get inside of another’s head; to coordinate activity with each other, participants must communicate somehow about that coordination. This is accomplished through recurrent switching (“turn-taking”) of signaler and observer/listener roles, with lots of checking and repair, to develop and confirm parallel or compatible understanding (Garfinkel 1967; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1978).

Achieving this kind of coordinated activity non-verbally is a gradual process, with participants incrementally aligning their spatial-orientational positions and synchronizing actions, and mutually orienting toward a common focus of attention. This usually occurs in iterative series of tight feedback loops, with larger demarcations, i.e. markers, between loops. To establish and sustain cooperative activity, participants rely tacitly but heavily on the markers that signify shifts in others’ attention and involvement, to coordinate with each other spatially (align) and temporally (synchronize). In focused interaction (joint activity) then, markers are critically implicated in coordinating and synchronizing shifts between phases of activity.

**Trans-Personal Markers.** Once participants achieve focused interaction, sustaining it requires maintaining a shared focus of attention and coordination of activity. Participants accomplish this through an iterative series of actions which recurrently align, synchronize and reciprocate with each other relative to a common focus of attention and locus of activity. Through iterative and reciprocal responsive actions over time, participants establish, confirm, and repair the jointness of their activity. As participants repeatedly coordinate their actions in joint activity, they come to be able to anticipate each other’s actions. Their markers also become temporally coordinated, so that they develop a rhythm and temporal efficiency (Condon 1982; Cohen & Bacdayan 1993). Sets of such shifts reflect steps in joint activity (Schefflen 1964), becoming in effect trans-personal markers, which also become more critically implicated in

coordinating and synchronizing shifts between phases of joint activity, and their coordinated performance constitutes the material heartbeat of organizational collectivity.

### **Situational View of Typified Communicative Action and Socially-Recognized Recurring [Context]**

**Typified Communicative Action.** As members of an organizational community recurrently enact patterns of co-present cooperative activity, these patterns become sedimented in their memories as habit or skill (Nelson & Winter 1982). At the same time, members develop the ability to recognize those markers and respond to them in keeping with the appropriate pattern. Organizational members recognize these conventionalized markers delimiting segments of cooperative activity, or “interacts” per (Weick 1979:89), which then trigger (their expectations of) the next step in the recurrent series, corresponding to Yates and Orlikowski’s “expectations” (1999, 2002a, 2007). Furthermore, because a marker both bounds a communicative act and directs attention to what comes next, performance of markers in conventionalized sequences assumes greater importance for recognizability of the sequence as a whole. The markers become prominent features of the action patterns, and may also entail the use of specific artifacts.

These prominent markers in recurrent sequences of action are termed *brackets* (Goffman 1986; Kendon 1977).<sup>2</sup> The term “bracket” signifies action performed by participants in conventional ways, signifying culturally-recognized meanings, and may include the use of artifacts. Goffman notes that such *brackets* delimit units of focused interaction, “especially collectively organized social activity” (1983: 6). Along with their material instrumental and significative [functions] within the action sequence, the markers therefore also take on more abstractly symbolic implications, coming to signify spatial and temporal beginnings and endings of conventionalized interaction patterns, separating the activities from their contexts (Czarniawska 2006: 1668). Each bracket is therefore both instrumental and significative.

And as with markers in focused interaction, participants performing the bracket are comprising spatial alignment, temporal synchronization, and reciprocity of bodily performances. In performing the embodied, material practice of a bracket, participants are also affirming for themselves and each other the continued progress of their coordinated activity. This normally goes on in the background of participants’ awareness, coming to the foreground of cognition only in cases of breach or breakdown. Both of these things are important, because participants know they are continuing to be coordinated, yet remain free to focus on the common object of their joint activity.

For co-present non-verbal interaction then, “typified communicative action” denotes a conventionalized series of brackets which also bears a commonly accepted name. Of special significance is the ordered sequence of brackets, punctuating phases (or metaphorical “phrases”) of communicative activity.

**Socially Recognized Recurring [Context].** In developing their genre approach, Yates & Orlikowski reference numerous examples of genres that their reading audience can readily recognize as occurring in “socially recognized recurrent situations” (Yates & Orlikowski 1992; Orlikowski & Yates 1994).<sup>3</sup> Yet such an approach skirts around the possibility of a materially grounded specification of recognizable parameters in such situations. As I am reserving the term “situation” for contexts of co-presence in which mutual monitoring occurs, I substitute the term “context” in this phrase of the genre definition and use the term Goffman (1963:18) developed

that closely parallels Yates & Orlikowski's "socially recognized recurrent situation" – that of "social occasion" – as more constitutionally precise.

### **Summary and Illustration**

To re-characterize the definition of genre in terms of embodied performance, it is helpful to start first with definition of a bracket, where a bracket is a commonly enacted and commonly recognized change or contrast in spatial-orientational position of a human body, possibly but not necessarily involving a material artifact, that conventionally signifies a shift in that actor's attentional focus and intent within a conventionalized sequence of actions. A situational genre then is a conventionalized series of brackets performed and recognized by embodied human actors in keeping with the norms of a social occasion. It entails spatial, temporal and relational aspects consistent with Yates & Orlikowski's genre approach.

The situational view of genre can be illustrated with a notional example of a co-present interview genre. The participants converge in space and time, bracketing their focused interaction with handshakes and seating themselves facing each other at relatively the same time; they then engage in a reciprocal exchange of utterances. The central portion of the embodied practice of the genre is characterized by brackets establishing focused interaction and reciprocity of conversational turn-taking. Participants may also orient to share a visual focus on a common artifact such as a business card or computer screen. Then both stand at relatively the same time and one or both exit, diverging again in space and time. Closing brackets are again, all coordinated shifts, including rising from seats, shaking hands, and walking away from each other. The bracket sequence is effective to the extent that participants observe and respond to major shifts in each other's spatial-orientational positioning in ways that advance their cooperative performance of the communicative convention socially-recognized as an interview.

## **DISCUSSION**

This situational view of genre affords considerable explanatory power for detailing generic ways that human agents organize their physical interaction for co-present communication. It contributes a material perspective to research on interlocking patterns of organizing, and to research that views communication as central to organizational processes. While there is naturally a great deal of overlap between these two areas, I address them separately for ease of comprehension.

This view of genre centers analysis on the action and interaction of embodied human actors; it highlights human agency, while still providing a basis for analysis of – non-human materialities. It thus preserves agency as a property of humans that integrates action with contexts of action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Combining the situational view with the broader literature on genre as organizing structure makes it possible to bridge across the micro- and macro- levels of analysis with a pair of complementary lenses. The combination thus facilitates "zooming in and out" across practice levels (Nicolini 2009).

By characterizing the non-verbal performance of a co-present genre in terms of conventionalized sequence(s) of witnessable shifts in actors' bodily positions and activities, the situational view of communicative genre supports the understanding of communication as involving multiple embodied participants. The situational view of genre "materializes organizational communication" (Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren 2009) by elucidating the material

role of embodied actors in organizing co-present communicative interaction, linking the material instrumentality of embodied practice with the signification of meaning of enacted genre, as two sides of a coin.

This situational view of genre extends existing structural views of communication (McPhee & Poole 2005; Poole & McPhee 2005) by materially grounding Yates & Orlikowski's genre approach at the situational level, illuminating a duality of structure (enacted genre) and action (embodied practice). The situational view of genre enables us to see that while social norms and structures persist over time through recurrence of behavioral patterns, the materiality of embodied action and objects is immanent within each situation. At the same time, it and delineates stages of cooperative activity.

This work is limited in its reference to a single notional example for illustration. Follow up studies with empirical studies of co-present communicative genres will be important, especially using observation and videotaping research methodologies (cf. LeBaron 2005). Another potentially fruitful area for future research would be to extend the situational view to genres of distance communication, highlighting the situated (Suchman 2007) and situational (Goffman 1963) use of technological artifacts. Such an extension might contrast embodied brackets with artifactual brackets of communication technologies, and thereby help elaborate Giddens' distinction between social integration and system integration (1986: 68ff), which he considers to be at the root of space-time distanciation.

## ENDNOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Deception is the primary counter-example.

<sup>2</sup> Goffman (1986: 251) uses "bracket" to refer to conventionalized markers directly involving artifacts, such as the banging of a gavel or the rising of a theater stage curtain. He reserves the term "body idiom" for typified bodily (nonverbal) communicative action in situations, "at least some [of which is] likely to be regularized and accorded a common meaning" (1963: 33). However, Kendon (1977:10) extends Goffman's term "bracket" to emphasize how bodily spatial-orientational positioning (1977: 10) literally frames other interactions, as in a greeting arrangement followed by a different, more settled set of postures.

<sup>3</sup> In more recent work, Yates & Orlikowski often simply identify genres as used by communities without referring to recurrent situations (2007; Yates *et al.* 2008).

## REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR

**Acknowledgements:** This paper originated out of my dissertation work at University of Michigan, under the direction of Michael Cohen, Martha Feldman, Margaret Hedstrom and Lance Sandelands. Early versions were presented at the ICA 2008 Montreal Preconference "What is an Organization?" and NCA 2009 Conference. It has benefitted from Anne Rawls' support for an exploration of Goffman's work, comments from Boris Brummans, Julie Rennecker, Deborah Soule, and NCA 2009 anonymous reviewers, and editorial assistance from William Waters. All errors and omissions remain my own.