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# Negotiation of expertise and multifunctionality: PowerPoint presentations as interactional activity types in workplace meetings



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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates exchanges between the presenter and another participant within PowerPoint presentations in workplace meetings. Using ethnomethodological conversation analysis as a method, it examines 1) how participants orient to each other's expertise, 2) what is accomplished through the exchange and 3) how the PowerPoint slide is interwoven with the process. The results show how the exchanges establish the presentation as information delivery in which the complexity of professional knowledge is displayed and negotiated. Moreover, there is an orientation to directive functions of the presentation activity. The PowerPoint slides as a text and as a material object are evoked for these purposes.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, PowerPoint presentations have become a prevailing part of organizational life. While previous research has largely focused on their communicative efficiency in various settings (e.g. [Craig and Amernic, 2006](#)) some studies have also investigated them as a form of social conduct. [Yates and Orlikowski \(2007\)](#) have, for instance, examined PowerPoints as a historically emerged configuration of a business presentation. Defining genre as an organizing structure that becomes manifested in specific aspects of communication (see [Yates and Orlikowski, 2002](#)) and using it as their starting point, they show how the PowerPoint presentation enables and constrains the communicative practices of organizational members. Importantly, their study reveals the hybridity of the PowerPoint presentation genre, for instance in terms of its function – the presentation may, for example, be employed to inform, propose or to advocate. [Kaplan \(2010\)](#) has further examined the use of the PowerPoint presentation in the epistemic culture of organizational strategy making, also emphasizing the hybridity of the presentation genre. She shows how the PowerPoint presentation enables collaborative knowledge production by providing an arena for assembling and sharing information. At the same time, it also arbitrates competing views, for example, by legitimizing certain ideas as worthwhile pursuing.

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However, although providing insights into the features of the PowerPoint presentation in organizational contexts, these studies have not investigated the way the presentation is accomplished as a situated activity. Yet, PowerPoint presentations are distinct linguistic and interactional encounters, in which talk, gestures and body position work in combination with the manipulation of written texts and material objects to form the recognizable activity of a 'presentation'. In recent times, a number of studies on social interaction have focused on this kind of interchange between materiality and verbal and embodied action (e.g. [Streeck et al., 2011](#); [Nevile et al., 2014](#)). Despite this, PowerPoint presentations have received little attention. They have been previously examined by [Rendle-Short \(2006\)](#), who shows how in academic presentations the speaker accomplishes engagement with a non-speaking audience through gaze, hand movements and body position. Moreover, [Knoblauch \(2008\)](#) has analyzed the way the speaker presents knowledge and locates it in space with a pointing gesture. Although illuminating the other-oriented nature of PowerPoint presentations, these studies have approached them as presenter-driven activities of 'knowledge transmission' ([Knoblauch, 2008](#)), where the recipients tend to remain silent. Interestingly, however, elsewhere [Knoblauch \(2014: 128–129\)](#) notes that the audience can be offered a slot to participate verbally in the presentation and provides an example of such a case.

In this article, we draw from and contribute to these research traditions by examining the PowerPoint presentation as an interactionally accomplished activity type occurring specifically in a workplace context. By activity type we mean a culturally recognized activity, which is "goal-defined, socially constituted, and a bounded event with constraints on participants and a setting" ([Levinson, 1979: 358](#)). Activity types can thus be seen as mutually constructed and intersubjective phenomena that unfold in interaction and are institutionalized to various degrees: the formation and recognition of social actions takes place in relation to them and the communicative goals they entail. In studying the situated realization of PowerPoint presentation activity, we will particularly focus on a phenomenon peculiar to our workplace data, that is, the exchange that takes place in the midst of the presentation between the speaker who is delivering the presentation and another meeting participant. As [Rendle-Short \(2006\)](#) states, the PowerPoint presentation as an interactional activity requires the participants to establish a mutual orientation towards an object of reference – this is accomplished by combining talk and embodied action to invite the audience to focus on a certain part of a slide. In the exchanges we study, this deictic process is intertwined with a further issue of 'ownership' concerning the slide and the information it contains. This is because as a form of information delivery (cf. [Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991](#)) the PowerPoint presentation projects different epistemic positions for the presenter and the recipients, but in exchanges between them, these positions are subjected to explicit negotiation. This has been shown earlier by [Mondada \(2012\)](#), who analyzes how a previously silent participant is established as an 'expert' in meeting interaction. Although not actually investigating this particular phenomenon, she notes that the episode begins by an audience member interrupting the presentation.

In our data, the workplace meetings are attended by various professionals both within and outside the organization, all with their specific areas of expertise, yet all working for the same project. The core aim of our study is to show how these complex professional positions are negotiated and talked into being in and through the exchanges and the epistemic rebalancing (see [Heritage, 2012b](#)) they create. In this way, we also aim to shed light on the underlying intricacies of workplace interaction in modern knowledge-intensive and multi-professional organizations. More specifically, through using ethnomethodological conversation analysis as a method (see e.g. [Sidnell and Stivers, 2012](#)), we will examine 1) how participants orient to each other's expertise when initiating an exchange in the middle of the presentation, 2) what is being accomplished with the exchange and how it positions the participants towards each other and the issue at hand, and 3) how the actual PowerPoint slide as a text and as a material object is interwoven with the process. Conversation analysis investigates how the participants achieve an intersubjective understanding of the social world in and through social interaction so that this understanding about what is happening in the interaction is publicly displayed and updated in the turns of the participants. In studying the PowerPoint presentations, the conversation analytical approach enables examination of the participants' publicly displayed understanding of the PowerPoint activity with regard to its function and the expertise involved. In particular, it also allows investigation of how the PowerPoint slides are used as a semiotic resource in the presentation context. Therefore, although the PowerPoint presentation can be seen as part of a broader category of presentation activity and some of the phenomena related to speaker exchange might perhaps also be found in presentations without any slides, these two are not the same thing. Instead, as we will show, the actual slides are an intrinsic part of the presentation and the questions to do with the speakers' expertise and the function of presentation are often closely intertwined with their material nature.

Before going to the analysis of our data, we will review relevant studies on knowledge and action in workplace interaction, and provide more information about our data and the collections that our analysis is based on.

## 2. Knowledge and action in workplace interaction

Knowledge lies at the heart of human interaction. Thus, any interactional event may comprise claims to knowing, requests for information, accounts of how something can be known and disputes about who knows better. Recent years, in particular, have seen an increase in the number of studies examining the way the participants negotiate and manage their knowledge discrepancies (e.g. [Heritage and Raymond, 2005](#); [Raymond and Heritage, 2006](#); [Heritage, 2012a, 2012b](#)).

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