

**How does a policy text mean? An interpretation of text as discourse genre  
and management practice.**

*Jeroen Vermeulen*

*Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University*

4<sup>th</sup> International Critical Management Studies Conference, 4-6 July 2005, Judge  
Institute of Management, University of Cambridge, UK.

Stream Talk and Text: Rhetoric, Reality and Research

Jeroen Vermeulen  
Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, The Netherlands  
[j.vermeulen@usg.uu.nl](mailto:j.vermeulen@usg.uu.nl)

Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC Utrecht, the Netherlands  
Tel. +31 30 2538101  
Fax. +31 30 2537200

## How does a policy text mean? An interpretation of text as discourse genre and management practice.

Jeroen Vermeulen, Utrecht University

This paper examines the meaning of text as an instrument of management action, by way of analysing a written text produced by the management of a large Dutch Christian school for higher vocational education. The title of the paper – how does a policy text mean?<sup>1</sup> – may seem grammatically odd, but is deliberately chosen. A more familiar title would be “*What does a policy text mean?*” But such a question would lead to a content analysis of text only; at best embedded in a description of the context surrounding the text. In the question, ‘policy text’ is the agent of the verb ‘mean’, consistent with the aim of this paper to examine text as a form of practice. Moreover, it leads to further questions like ‘how does a policy text convey its meanings?’, ‘how is the text grounded in a locally defined social context?’ and ‘how can text be used as a management tool that aims at influencing organisational meanings?’

In order to be able to analyse policy text in the context of organizations and of management action, in this paper I will turn to a linguistic anthropological approach to text, to which the notions of discourse genre and practice are central (Hanks, 1987; 1989; 1996). Such an approach takes from literary theories that textuality is not so much studied formally as an autonomous artifact but, interpretively, as embedded in a social and historical context. The notion of genre is useful because it is seen as “mediat[ing] between [text]works and larger historical contexts” (Hanks, 1989: 99).] Genres are treated as “schematic and incomplete resources on which speakers necessarily improvise in practice” (Hanks, 1987: 681). As schemes for practice, genres are part of linguistic habitus. That is, one could say that genres are conventional discourse forms that are part of routinised modes of perception, action and evaluation. The notion of genre, then, allows broadening the analysis of text to the social practices of its production and reception.

The text under scrutiny here is written by the management of a Christian school for higher vocational education in the Netherlands<sup>2</sup>. Important to the context of action of this ‘strategic policy text’ are changes in the field of higher education in the Netherlands and a major societal change that can be summarised as ‘depillarisation’. At the end of the nineteen-eighties the school named *Windesheim* in the northeast of the Netherlands became the largest Christian school for higher vocational education of the country, after merging six autonomous schools. The six merged into one school at one newly built Campus, each former school then becoming a faculty of Windesheim. Each faculty kept some relative independency on the level of management. At the beginning of the nineteen-nineties central

---

<sup>1</sup> The title is borrowed from a book by Dvora Yanow (1996) in which she develops an interpretive approach to organisations and public policies.

<sup>2</sup> The research reported here was carried out in the period 1996-1997 and was part of my PhD project (Vermeulen, 2001).

government reduced the budget on higher education, and changed towards financing the institutions on the basis of output (i.e. number of graduated students that schools 'delivered'). Moreover, government promoted further regional and administrative clustering of schools. As a consequence Windesheim, like other institutions, had to reconsider its financial means and costs, which became an impetus for changes in the organisation. These changes were framed as working towards integration and coherence between the faculties, leading to greater centralisation. At the same time the school had to make clear that its existence as an autonomous school was legitimate. For Windesheim this meant also, or better: specifically, a reorientation on its Christian identity. Concerning the latter, some explanation on the societal change called 'depillarisation', typical for the Dutch situation, is in order here.

Until the mid-nineteen-sixties, the institutions and organisations of Dutch society in the twentieth century were divided along three so-called 'pillars' (Lijphart, 1976). These three were the Catholic pillar, the Protestant-Christian and the general (divided into a socialist and a liberal) pillar. Each pillar had its own network of public organisations in the field of education, politics, media, and healthcare. Thus the three pillars separated the respective groups of the Dutch population. Except for their leaders at the top, there wasn't much of exchange and contact between the groups.

Since the nineteen-sixties a process of 'depillarisation' can be detected (Lijphart, 1976). The boundaries between the various groups, organised around the three pillars, started to erode. Mergers between public organisation from different denominations occur. At the same time the identities of the ideologically imbued public organisations were being questioned. So for Windesheim the question became relevant what it meant to be a Christian (Protestant-Christian) school in a depillarising society. Is its Christian identity still a significant and defining characteristic? If so, for whom, for which groups and institutions? And, if so, in what way could its Christian identity be relevant in the school's (re) positioning in the field of higher education and in the school's internal reorganisation? In fact, the question of its Christian identity was, at the time of producing the strategic text, connected to various organisational topics that management had to deal with (finance, centralisation, legitimacy) – at least potentially. Although it could be stated that the importance of the religious identity of the school was decreasing – due to the process of depillarisation in society at large -- the issue was quite sensitive. Inside as well as outside the school relevant groups and institutional actors (such as local and central Christian political parties, church, potential partners in the field of higher education, potential groups of students and their parents) still adhered to the 'old' network of organisations belonging to the Protestant-Christian pillar and its values. On the other hand, there were groups and individuals inside and outside the school that favored breaking the ideological ties and that hoped for management actions aimed at looking for new partners and new paths. The challenge of producing the text then was to change the direction of the school, while addressing a variety of audiences and a diversity of topics, blending familiar ways of speaking with new ones. The text is referred to as a 'strategic policy text' within the text itself. The label indicates that the text is focused on managing change; but apart from that, the label is far from being straightforward. Instead, the text shows a plurality of functional and stylistic details

that reflects the complexity of the organisational context. The text is once rhetorical and persuasive, once ideational and descriptive, once ideological and evaluative. In all these respects this text is a blend of various communicative acts, which may be typical for these kinds of organizational texts, generally speaking. Of course, this leads to the problem of coherence: how can a strategic text be produced that will be interpreted as coherent, clear in its aims and consistent? This is a matter of importance here, for management, as producers of this text, aim to influence and even direct organizational action based on the choices and meanings made in the text. What elements of style, rhetoric and other formal features of text are available – and strategically used in practice – that are oriented to the reception of the text by organizational actors to which the text is addressed? Genres as kind of practice provide ways of achieving such orientation (Hanks, 1996: 245).

### **Discourse genre as social practice**

We need to understand the relation between the text of the Windesheim management as a work – that is, as an artifact with its formal, stylistic features – and the broader social reality in which it was produced and received. In what manner is the concept of genre of any help? From a formal, linguistic point of view genres are types of text or types of language use that are characterised and distinguished by their respective formal features. But in this sense, the concept of genre is not very useful for our purposes, for it does not take into account that texts are instruments of action used in specific circumstances and for context specific purposes. Hanks (1987) suggests genres to be defined “as the historically specific conventions and ideals according to which authors compose discourse and audiences receive it. In this view, genres consist of orienting frameworks, interpretive procedures and sets of expectations that are ... [part of] the ways actors relate to and use language” (ibid: 670). This means, that a specific genre – like fiction, a sermon or a policy text for that matter – orients readers to certain interpretations and expectations and not to others. In this sense, genre is constraining the way actors use and interpret language and at the same time helping them in providing resources to act. Genres consist of recurrent, conventionalised, groupings of thematic, stylistic and compositional features (Bakhtin, 1986), which constitute communicative practice. At the same time genres are produced *in* communicative practice “and subject to innovation, manipulation and change” (Hanks, 1987: 677). In the next paragraph we will use genre as an action concept in order to understand the text of the Windesheim school as an instrument of management action. We will discuss four dimensions along which Hanks (1996) distinguishes genres: complexity, finalization, regularisation and officialisation. The last three dimensions are ways of orienting discourse genres to their reception.

### **Complexity and dialogue**

Genres differ in degree of complexity. Bakhtin distinguished between primary or simple genres and secondary, complex, ones. The distinction is not absolute, but heuristic. Primary genres consist of just one kind of communicative practice, whereas secondary ones include two or more primary genres. An example of a secondary genre, discussed by Bakhtin (1981) is the novel, which includes almost

all other types of discourse through intertextuality, dialogism, reported speech and so forth. But also public speeches or sermons are illustrations of secondary or complex genres. Primary genres would include, for instance, ordering bread at a bakery, greeting a friend, asking the way to someone in the street.

Earlier in this paper I wrote that the strategic text produced by the management of Windesheim was a blend of various communicative practices. In terms of genre, then, the text is typically of the complex or secondary kind. The following three excerpts provide examples of the use of different styles within one episode of the text (chapter 3 in the booklet, comprising 4 pages in total)

1. Excerpts from 'strategic policy text' of Windesheim, chapter 3 called "Identity: a way to go".

- A. "In the economic-technological domain we see: increasing economic growth, an insufficient dedication to a durable environment [and] the persistence of immense differences in opportunities for living between a rich minority and a poor majority of the world population. In the social-cultural domain we see: ongoing processes of individualisation, together with social and ethnic fragmentation of society [and] increasing confusion about questions of sense making."
- B. "For many the school is seen only as supplier of knowledge and manpower in service of the economic-technological process. By that society does not do justice to itself. Windesheim cannot accept having to function as a kind of knowledge-factory exclusively."
- C. "We do not choose for a certain theological current or ecclesiastical direction. We do join the broad stream of 'Gods people on its way', throughout time. Our partners are all those who, whatever their philosophy of life, stand for the striving towards justice, peace and a durable world. That is the quest. None of us owns the (whole) truth."

At the beginning of the chapter on identity the text provides a seemingly detached, objective description of the then current social and economic context. In wording, style and content excerpt 1A echoes well-known sociological analyses of late-modern western societies. In excerpt B the tone changes: the text discusses the place of the school in current society.

Excerpt C differs from the other two not only in content-matter (its Christian identity), but also in the style and (metaphorical) wording related to that content. A generic characterisation of this excerpt would lie in the direction of a sermon. Within excerpt C there is even more complexity through reported speech – seemingly a direct quotation (nb the quotation marks) from the bible "God's people on its way".

In excerpt B as well as in C, sentences contain markers of negation ('Windesheim cannot accept..' and 'we do not choose..'). Markers of negation (like 'not', 'nevertheless') or of contrast (like 'however') indicate dialogism in discourse. Dialogism is different from 'dialogue' that refers to an interactive relation between two persons. Dialogism is a more abstract notion and points to an internal dynamism in discourse (see Hanks, 1996: 206). Negation and contrast as

linguistic means are dialogic (or polyphonic) in the sense that they show that arguments are based on the existence of opposite opinions. As Billig (1991:17) says: "The argument 'for' a position is always an argument 'against a counterposition' ". The sentences of excerpts B and C use the principle of dialogism in a rhetorical manner. Dialogism, or polyphony, is typical for political texts, like this strategic policy text of Windesheim "as they reflect and incorporate the voices of all parties involved in the decision-making process (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998: 53; see also van der Mast, 1999). The dialogic character of the Windesheim-text reflects internal discussions within the school. It reveals the context of production of the text and underlines the actional aspect of text within this complex genre.

### **Action implies incompleteness**

The heterogeneity of the text leads to the question how this text, and policy texts as secondary genres in general, can be considered as coherent wholes, that enables interpretation and that directs action. This problem leads to another dimension along which genres differ, what Bakhtin (1986: 76) called 'finalisation'. Finalisation is the process whereby a work becomes complete. As said before, genres are never complete in the formalistic sense that they contain fixed relations between style, content and composition. From a practice-based perspective genres are "schematic and incomplete resources which speakers and writers use/ on which speakers necessarily improvise in practice" (Hanks, 1987: 681). Seen from the point of view of action, coherence and completeness are matters of framing and evaluating discourse. Interpreting discourse as complete is as much a matter of reception as it is of production.

Some kinds of communicative practices are relatively more incomplete and thus more open to interpretations. This can be the case if they are ambiguous with regard to their framing, or because they lack elements that complete or finalise the work; i.e. they lack elements that would be considered basic to a certain genre. For example, in an official setting to be married by a man or woman who is not authorised to act, and without necessary witnesses. Or, the telling of a joke without the point. From an action perspective definite closure of the meaning of discourse is problematic. Meanings are often temporary from such perspective. Hanks (1996:243) says that some genres are incomplete in the sense that at any given point they may seem finalised, but nevertheless remain open to reinterpretation, and hence refinalisation.

One manner through which finalisation of a work may be achieved is through metalinguistic specification of genre within the text itself. The introductory paragraph to the policy text of Windesheim is instructive and revealing in this sense. The text indeed refers to itself generically as a 'strategic statement' and as 'strategic policy'. But interestingly, it comments on the genre it is part of, and distances itself from it, in an ironic manner.

*2. Excerpt from the introductory pages of the 'strategic policy text' of the Windesheim school.*

"It is not very useful as the management to start writing from your ivory tower a beautiful statement on the future of the school. For such a statement will be experienced as unreal by the members of the organisation who on a daily basis wrestle with the problems of the current school practice. This book was produced in a different manner."

Note – again – the negation in the first sentence, indicating dialogism. In that same style, the text refers to its policy as 'not a blueprint'. Moreover, the introductory paragraph is replete with remarks that refer to the text's context of production and reception. It states that the text is 'the result of a long process'. Through these metalinguistic remarks emphasis is put on the uncertainty of the text's reception in and outside the organisation. At the end of the introduction a famous Dutch poem is quoted (in quotation marks, but nevertheless slightly adapted): "between dream and deed laws stand in the way and practical objections". In these ways producers of the text indicate their awareness towards the reception of the discourse. It is an attempt to regiment the text's reception, based on the awareness that neither the interpretations of the text nor of the genre can be finalised in the words only. There is an awareness of the dialogic character of this text, in the fundamental sense that there is disunity and thus a divergence of meanings attached to the text. And knowing that the text will be subject to refinalisation or revision, metalinguistic markers (including reported speech and polyphony) have the function of directing the reception of the text.

*3. Excerpt from the introductory pages of the 'strategic policy text' of the Windesheim school*

"The difference between wished for and current functionality leads to the challenge: one will have to follow a path, will have to travel. The one who cannot or doesn't want to allow him to free himself from existing reality will not be able to go on a journey."

The Windesheim text as a whole contains an interesting metaphor – that functions as a metalinguistic framing – the metaphor of a journey. The strategic text is given the title 'A Journey' and this metaphor is used quite consistently throughout the text. In the introductory paragraph the metaphor of a journey is used rhetorically to indicate the necessity and unavoidability of the organisational change and the choices the management made in the policy text. In that sense the text orients to its reception, tries to get some grip and control on the way this text will influence further trajectories. Those who will not follow the choices that were made in this text, will be marked as the ones who will stay behind, the ones who will not travel along. But who wants to stay behind, who doesn't want change (see also Grey, 2005: 90)?

The metaphor of a journey, moreover, produces connotations that are in line with the school's Christian identity. The use of the metaphor allows the management to

show adherence to the Christian values that are meaningful to many in the school, and at the same time to suggest change.

### **Regulating and officialising the policy text**

To use the metaphor in this text in order to connect to important, religious, meanings in the organisation is, according to Hanks (1996: 244) a way to adapt the genre to “dominant power structures in the field to which it is addressed”. In this manner agents strategically adapt their discourse to the expectations and traditions of their addressees, which is often necessary to get its meanings accepted. Writers regularise their way of speaking to the context in which they act or want to act.

*4 Excerpts from ‘strategic policy text’ of Windesheim, chapter 3 called “Identity: a way to go”.*

A. “Nevertheless, we want to be clear about the fact that we choose our most important source of inspiration in the story of God’s journey with people, as it echoes from the bible. That source sees life as a gift and a challenge, and gives wisdom on one’s way”

B. "For Windesheim the biblical notions with regard to justice, peace and the concern for a durable society are normative. These notions are not ready-made blue-prints, but functions as beacons that lay out the course for our quest."

The metaphor of the journey is elaborated in the text, as illustrated in these excerpts (note also the title of the chapter 3, and recall excerpt 1C). The use of the metaphor links the proposed changes in the strategic text to the school’s Christian identity. Note also the word ‘blue-prints’ (4B) in connection to biblical notions. The same word was used in the introduction in connection to the status of strategic policy texts. The linking of change to identity is important in two respects. On the one hand, the text hereby legitimates the proposed changes. On the other hand, by connecting change and Christian identity, the text tries to make the organisational changes more acceptable for its Christian audience inside and outside the school.

A word about the style of both excerpts: again dialogism is used by way of negation and contrast. Especially with respect to the Christian identity of the school multivoicedness is an existent reality. The mere fact that multiple and even divergent opinions exist about the meaning of the school Christian identity has to be acknowledged in the text. The dialogism shown here is another way of regularising the text to the field in which it is produced and will be received. This stylistic feature of the strategic policy text shows the actional aspect of the concept of genre. Not only is polyphony a generic characteristic of policy texts, but it is used strategically here in order to regularise the text. This is nicely illustrated in the introductory paragraph.



*5 Excerpt from the introductory pages of the 'strategic policy text' of the Windesheim school*

“A Journey’ is the result of a long process, in which members were stimulated to think for themselves about the future of Windesheim (see appendix 1). Within the whole organisation members provided building stones for the strategic vision. Eventually the definitive version of the strategic statements came, which you now hold in your hands”

The text refers to ‘appendix 1’, in which all the formal communicative activities are summed up that were part of the ‘long process’. The policy text is being presented as embedded in a field of manifest intertextual relations (Fairclough, 1992: 85). By explicitly emphasising its intertextuality and by calling the text ‘the result’ of a communicative process the text comes out as the translation of that same process. In that sense, the text states that it connects to meanings expressed in the preceding communicative acts by members of the organisation. It adds to the regularisation of the policy text. At the same time, however, content, form as well as context of these preceding communicative acts remains invisible. And, thus, the exact relations between these acts and the ‘resulting’ policy text – and the way these acts are inscribed or entextualised in the policy text (Silverstein & Urban, 1996) – remain unnamed and invisible. And this adds to naturalising the views expressed in the policy text and to placing them beyond discussion.

Closely related to regularisation of the genre is the process of making the genre official. This ‘officialisation’ (Hanks, 1996: 244) is signalled here. By explicitly referring to the communicative, or dialogic, history of the policy text, and by calling the text the result of that communicative history, the producers of the text signal the “authentic and authoritative grounds on which they speak” (ibid). They speak in name of the members of the organisation. But note that in excerpt 5 the members are not ascribed a decisive role in this process, by way of the passive constructions of the sentence: ‘they ‘were stimulated’. By whom? It remains unsaid, but obviously they were stimulated by the management of Windesheim. The management is described as the active party in the process of producing the policy text (also read again excerpt 2 about the role of management). The framing of the whole text at the last page of the policy text is illustrative. It writes: “This is our answer”. It is the, at least temporary, end of the dialogue. The last word is the management’s. Naming of place and date, including the names and signatures of the members of the management seal it all off. This strategic policy text is the *official* answer. That means that when further discussion on the issues and choices written about in the management’s text will occur, it has to be in the terms set in this text. As Hanks writes: “Official speech typically has the potential to make truth while imposing the terms in which actors must respond” (Hanks, 1987: 676). Moreover, another implication of the active position the management assigns itself through the strategic text is that it aims at becoming the central actor in the organization. This is perfectly in line with its agenda of achieving greater centralization through organizational change.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that the concept of discourse genre is a useful one in analysing text as an instrument of management action. Writing in order to influence organizational action has not so much to do with unambiguous or clear wording of aims (see also Apthorpe, 1997), but with the strategic use of generic means that orient to reception of text. I argued – with Hanks (1987, 1996) – that genre is part of action. Policy or strategic texts are complex genres (see Czarniawska, 1999): they are a mix of various communicative acts. This has to do with its polyphonic or dialogic character. Policy text, or ‘political texts’ in general are dialogic because they typically have to reflect, incorporate and address multiple parties and their opinions. In the case of the strategic policy text of a school for higher vocational education in the Netherlands, that I presented here, the dialogical character is found on the level of its style (negation), by way of using metaphor and reported speech as rhetorical devices. The complexity of the genre as well as its dialogism point to the problem of coherence and the difficulty of interpreting the discourse. Instead of influencing organizational action in a coherent manner, the strategic text (by way of its dialogism) contains also the possibility of disunity and instability, lack of direction. In the strategic text presented here, the producers skillfully and strategically use the dialogism as a frame that legitimates the text as broadly shared – the result of dialogue – and themselves as central actors – as the ones that initiated dialogue and that provided a response to questions of the members of the organization.

## References

- Apthorpe, Raymond (1997) "Writing development policy and policy analysis plain or clear. On language, genre and power", in C. Shore *et al.* (eds) *Anthropology of policy*, London: Routledge, pp. 43-58.
- Bakhtin, Michael. M. (1981) *The dialogic imagination. Four essays*. Edited by M.Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, Michael. M (1986) *Speech genres and other essays*. Edited by M.Holquist and C.Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Billig, M. (1991) *Ideology and opinions*, London: Sage.
- Blommaert, Jan & Jef Verschuere (1998) *Debating diversity. Analysing the discourse of tolerance*, London: Routledge.
- Czarniawska, Barbara (1999) *Writing management. Organization theory as a literary genre*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fairclough, Norman (1992) *Discourse and social change*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Grey, Chris (2005) *A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book about studying organizations*, London etc.: Sage Publications.
- Hanks, William F. (1987) "Discourse genres in a theory of practice", *American Ethnologist* 14 (4): 688-692.
- Hanks, William F. (1989) "Text and textuality", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18: 95-127.
- Hanks, William F. (1996) *Language and communicative practices*, Boulder, Colorado: WestviewPress.
- Lijphart, Arend (1976) *The politics of accommodation: pluralism and democracy in the Netherlands*, University of California Press.
- Mast, Niels van der (1999) *Woordenwisselingen. Een onderzoek naar de manier waarop schrijvers consensus over beleidsteksten bewerkstelligen*, Amsterdam: Thela Thesis .

Silverstein, Michael & Greg Urban (eds.) (1996) *Natural histories of discourse*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Vermeulen, Jeroen (2001) *De naam van de school. Worstelen met identiteit op een christelijke hogeschool* [The name of the school. Wrestling with identity on a Christian school for higher vocational education], Baarn: ten Have.

Yanow, Dvora (1996) *How does a policy mean? Interpreting policy and organizational actions*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.