

Characterising the Genre of the Corporate Press Release

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a study of press releases issued by UK biotechnology companies between 2000 and 2002, which sought to identify the key characteristics of company press releases as a genre, and to relate those characteristics to the context in which press releases are produced and received, in particular the goals they are designed to serve.

Press releases are one type of business or corporate genre amongst many others. Orlikowski and Yates (1994) and Yates and Orlikowski (1992), in their research on organisational genres, refer to other examples, such as the business letter, the memo and the report. What all genres, including organisational genres, have in common, is the fact that they are all examples of “typified rhetorical action in the context of socially defined recurrent situations” (Yates and Orlikowski 1992: 301). Bhatia (1999) takes this further, noting that “Genres are essentially defined in terms of the use of language in conventionalised communicative settings, which give rise to a specific set of communicative goals for specialised disciplinary and social groups, which in turn establish relatively stable structural forms and, to some extent, even constrain the use of lexico-grammatical resources” (Bhatia 1999: 152). Corporate press releases respond to a specific recurring situation and have their own distinctive purpose – that is, to communicate news about the company, usually in relation to a specific event or development, to a wide audience (chiefly external to the company, but internal too), and to serve the public relations needs of the company.¹ Press releases also have their own distinctive format and style; these will be the areas of interest examined here. The study will discuss the purpose of press releases, including the topics of press releases, or the types of events or developments which give rise to press releases, the typical format or structure of press releases, and lastly key features of the language of press releases, including

most notably aspects of evaluation and the making of claims. The paper therefore seeks to go beyond the study of schematic structure alone and to examine textural features of press releases – lexico-grammatical features found on the surface of the text – and to relate all of these features which are found to be conventional and expected to issues of context and pragmatics. The study will draw primarily on work in genre analysis (e.g. Bhatia 1993, 1999, 2004; Flowerdew and Dudley-Evans 2002; Gimenez 2002; Luzón Marco 2002; Swales 1990; Van Nus 1999), but also work from a text linguistics and/or pragmatics perspective (e.g. Bell 1984; Hatim and Mason 1990, 1997), including studies of specific types of business texts such as Jacobs (1998, 1999a, b) on press releases, and business communication research by, for example, Rogers and Swales (1990) and Swales and Rogers (1995) on genres such as ethical codes and mission statements.

Unlike some work which has studied press releases (e.g. Bell 1991; Jacobs 1998, 1999a, b), the focus here will not be so much the processes by means of which press releases are created, but rather the conventional features of press releases as corporate texts and as examples of a ubiquitous, familiar and, it would appear, static genre. The approach adopted is therefore product-oriented rather than process-oriented, although the processes of production will be considered where appropriate, and particularly where they help explain certain features of the texts themselves.

The biotechnology sector is a particularly interesting sector to investigate for, in the UK, biotechnology companies are faced with an extremely difficult situation. In biotechnology the process of product innovation and development is extremely complex and costly – according to Gracie (1998), the full development of a new biotechnology product can take as long as six to eight years –, with the result that companies require high levels of investment, especially in the early stages. However, the biotechnology sector is a high-risk sector, since outcomes are uncertain, and so for investors the level of risk is high. A successful communication strategy which creates and maintains a positive corporate image and good investor relations is therefore crucially important for business development. A further complicating factor is the controversy which has surrounded the biotech sector in many countries, not least the UK, where the biotech sector is viewed with some suspicion and mistrust by the general public. It is within this context that press releases have a key role to play; factors external to texts such as these also have an important influence on the linguistic, textual and pragmatic choices made by writers.

2. Corporate Press Releases as a Business Genre

As noted above, genres are defined in relation to recurrent social situations, and Van Nus (1999), who focuses specifically on the corporate context, notes that “business genres are defined as responses to organisational communicative needs in recurrent business situations (cf. Miller, 1984; Yates and Orlikowski, 1992)” (Van Nus 1999: 190). Yates and Orlikowski (1992) examine the features of texts which are examples of organisational and business genres and note, for instance, that each

genre is characterised by “similar substance and form”, “substance” referring to “the social motives, themes, and topics being expressed in the communication”, while form relates to “the observable physical and linguistic features of the communication” (Yates and Orlikowski 1992: 301).

Let us consider “substance” first. As Orlikowski and Yates (1994) note, drawing on Miller (1984), motives, themes, etc. are conventionalised within the discourse community within which the genre is used: “The communicative purpose of a genre is not rooted in a single individual’s motive for communicating, but in a purpose that is constructed, recognised, and reinforced within a community (Miller, 1984)” (Orlikowski and Yates 1994: 543). They give the example of an annual shareholders’ meeting, the commonly recognised purpose of which is “to report on the company’s past accomplishments and present its future outlook to stockholders...” (Orlikowski and Yates 1994: 543). The purpose of a company press release is similar: to publish news about the company, to bring information about the new developments into the public domain. A further key purpose of press releases is to present the company in as favourable a light as possible. Press releases, then, tend to be “hybrid” texts (on this, see, for example, Hatim and Mason 1990, 1997): they seek both to inform and to persuade. As Cook (1989) notes in a discussion about American politics, “the point of a press release is not accuracy so much as showing the representative in a good light” (cited in Jacobs, 1999a: 45), and according to Hess (1989), by their very nature, press releases represent the views of the organisation that issued them. Talking about US government agencies, for instance, he notes that press releases “are an agency’s opportunity to order information in a manner that the agency considers most advantageous to its mission” (Hess 1989: 47). In his study of 600 Dutch press releases Jacobs (1999b) also points to their dual function, noting that they occupy the middle ground between advertising and news reporting. He describes them as “egocentric”: “press releases – like other types of corporate disclosure discourse, including business organisations’ annual reports – can be considered ‘egocentric’: organisations invariably issue them when they want to say something about themselves” (Jacobs 1999b: 220). Press releases can be used by companies to shape their corporate image, to show how well they are doing and to persuade potential investors that the company is worth investing in, as well as reassuring existing investors that their choice is still a good one. This is particularly important in the British biotechnology sector because of the enormous financial costs of pursuing research in this area.

The target audience of press releases is multifarious. The main addressees of corporate press releases are shareholders and potential investors, especially in the biotech sector. In addition, however, there are a number of other audience groups, such as market analysts or competitors, who are undoubtedly taken into account during the production of the press release and who would be “auditors” in Bell’s (1984) model of audience design. The situation is further complicated by what Jacobs (1998, 1999a, b) terms the “preformulated” nature of press releases, namely the fact that press releases are written for journalists who, it is hoped, will retell the

company's news in an article or report. This point is made also by Bell (1991) who examines the processes by which news is created and reported, as well as the resulting language used by the news media. Thus, as Jacobs (1999a: 46) argues, "press releases seem to be aimed at two different audiences at the same time, viz. journalists as well as those journalists' own audiences of newspaper readers, TV viewers etc... the role of the journalists seems to be the pivotal one of retelling press releases, of forwarding the news supplied to them." Press releases are also communicated to some audience members directly, however. All biotechnology companies which feature in this study post their press releases on the corporate website, usually in a section entitled either "Information for investors" or "Press"/"Media", which can be accessed by all users of the website, and in many cases it is possible to sign up to receive company news, including press releases by email. This is evidence that the press release is crafted ultimately for the consumption of investors. Although it is true that many such investors will see the text only after the intervention or mediation of the journalist, this is by no means the case for all. Indeed, as has been noted (e.g. by Gurău and McLaren 2003), companies are able now, more than ever before, to communicate directly with their audiences, including investors, through their websites and can perhaps influence the communication process generally and their audiences' perceptions more, thanks to the increasing use of Internet technology.

As far as "form" is concerned, Yates and Orlikowski (1992) note that "There are at least three aspects of form in organisational communication: structural features (e.g., text-formatting devices such as lists and fields and devices for structuring group interactions, such as an agenda and a chairperson for a meeting), communication medium (e.g., pen and paper or face to face), and language or symbol system (which would include linguistic characteristics such as formality and the specialised vocabulary of technical or legal jargon)" (Yates and Orlikowski 1992: 301-302). In the case of a corporate press release the communication medium is clearly the written medium, unlike a genre such as a meeting which is interactive and chiefly spoken (although it should be noted that press releases are often accompanied by a press conference, which is indeed an interactive genre of a similar type to a meeting). The structural and linguistic features of corporate press releases are less obvious and will be examined in this article in some detail.

Although Jacobs, who is responsible for perhaps most research on corporate press releases, does not focus explicitly on issues of format or structure in his work, he does consider textual and linguistic conventions and identifies what he calls the "metapragmatics of press releases". Under this heading he examines the phenomena of self-reference, self-quotation and explicit semi-performatives (e.g. *announce*), all of which he describes as "standard features of press releases" (Jacobs 1999a: 79).

On the issue of self-reference Jacobs's analyses point to the fact that there are hardly any first person pronouns (*we*, etc) used in press releases which he notes "is unexpected, to say the least", because press releases (like other types of corporate

disclosure discourse, such as annual reports) are issued when companies “want to say something about themselves (Jacobs 1999b: 220)”. Instead he finds that “it is a characteristic feature of the production of press releases that self-referencing is almost exclusively realised in the third person, in particular through the use of the organisation’s proper name” (1999b: 220). He argues that the various forms of third person self-reference in his corpus can only be correctly interpreted if the “tellability” of press releases is taken into account: through third person self-reference writers of press releases switch out of their own perspective and move some way towards that of the journalists, who are expected to copy the press releases into their own news reporting.

In his examination of self-quotation, Jacobs notes that press releases are heavily characterised by instances of what Bell (1991) calls “pseudo-direct speech”, where the words “were almost certainly not verbalised by the named source [, but] written by a press officer and merely approved by the source (sometimes not even that)” (Bell 1991: 60). Self-quotation is claimed to fulfil many of the same functions as third-person self-reference, including preformulation: “it appears as if the writer of the press release is switching out of his or her own perspective and takes that of the journalists, who are expected to retell the press release in their own news reporting” (Jacobs 1999a: 183). Self-quotation also allows writers of press releases to distance themselves from what is being reported. As Goffman puts it, “[i]nstead of stating a view outright, the individual tends to attribute it to a character who happens to be himself, but one he has been careful to withdraw from in one regard or another” (1974: 551). Thus self-quotation also serves to make press releases look neutral – “serves to anticipate the typical objectivity requirements of news reporting” (Jacobs 1999a: 195) – and reliable – “quotation marks are traditionally assumed to signal verbatim reporting... as a result, they lend an air of reliability to the report” (Jacobs 1999a: 196).

Lastly, Jacobs (e.g. 1999a) identifies what he calls semi-performatives in press releases such as *announce* or *remark* in statements such as “The Customs and Excise Administration announces that...”. Here “in the very act of saying that they ‘announce that they managed to confiscate 32 kg of pure cocaine’, the customs authorities are indeed announcing that they did so. In other words, the press release *is* the announcement and this seems to be in line with Allan Bell’s claim that press releases are performative documents (1991)”. Again Jacobs links the use of such semi-performatives to preformulation: “the explicit semi-performative utterances in extracts from press releases... can easily be retold verbatim by journalists in their own news reporting” (1999a: 251) and as such they serve a preformulating function.

As we shall see, a number of the metapragmatic features of press releases identified by Jacobs (1998, 1999a, b) and Bell (1984, 1991) are found in the corpus under examination here. However, a number of other interesting features of a structural and linguistic and/or pragmatic nature were also identified and will be discussed in section 4.

3. The Corpus

The corpus of data used for this study consists of approximately 50 press releases issued by 20 biotechnology companies based in the UK between 2000 and 2002ⁱⁱ and accessed on the company's websites. The companies concerned are all primarily research and development companies and are traded on the stock market, with the result that for them an effective communications strategy which allows them to maintain a positive corporate image and to attract investment is imperative.

Most frequently the press releases included in the corpus used here, and indeed press releases issued by biotechnology companies in the United Kingdom generally, are concerned with one of a small number of topics. These include most notably the publication of financial results; business developments such as the opening of a new facility or expansion into a new market; collaboration between the issuing company and some other company, and acquisitions and mergers; updates on and results of clinical trials; and decisions taken by regulatory authorities. These topics are reflected in the titles given to press releases. These topics are clearly not exclusive to companies in the biotechnology sector, however. Financial results, for instance, are published by all companies listed on the stock exchange, regardless of the sector in which they operate, and business developments of the type noted above are also a general feature of all industrial sectors. Nonetheless, a number of the topics listed are especially important in the biotechnology sector, perhaps more so than in other sectors of industry. Clinical trials, for instance, are very important in the biotechnology sector, especially the biopharmaceutical sector. This is because, as noted above, the process of product development can take many years, with the result that there is very little news for R&D companies to publicise for a very long time on the subject of products. Any progress which is made in clinical trials is therefore extremely important and must be communicated to investors in order that they are kept abreast of developments and that they are reassured that the company will ultimately be successful in developing an end product. Such trials, and the process of product development generally, are heavily influenced by decisions taken by regulatory bodies who control and regulate the activities of biotechnology companies. Such bodies can determine whether research should go ahead or not, whether companies should be issued with a licence to sell a particular product, whether product licences should be suspended and products recalled, and so on. Also involved here is the issuing of patents for particular products and techniques. Consequently, decisions taken by regulatory bodies are frequent triggers for the publication of company press releases. Collaboration between companies is also especially important in biotechnology for many of the reasons given above. Since the process of product development is so lengthy and costly, companies are increasingly looking to form partnerships or collaborations with other companies in order that the financial burden they face may be shared. This means that there are more collaborations in biotechnology than in other sectors and that companies are keen to publicise partnerships to investors and the business community generally. All of the topics relate to the recurring situations to which the genre of the press release responds,

i.e. in which press releases are expected, required, produced and distributed, in the biotechnology sector in the UK.

4. Conventions of Corporate Press Releases

4.1. Structural Characteristics: The Format of Corporate Press Releases

The first stage of the analysis involved an investigation of the format or structure of press releases and the constituents of that format. The approach adopted here is similar to the type of approach adopted by genre analysts such as Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993) or Paltridge (1997), who have shown that genres such as academic research articles consist of a series of “moves” or “steps” or “components”. As is noted by Flowerdew and Dudley-Evans (2002), drawing on Swales (1990), the resulting schematic structures “are prototypes which can be subject to different amounts of variation according to the degree to which the genre is conventionalised (Swales 1990). In most genres, moves will be either obligatory or optional; they may be fixed or in a variable sequence, they may be subject to embedding one within the other, and they may be recursive (Swales 1990)” (Flowerdew and Dudley-Evans 2002: 470).

During the analysis conducted for the purpose of this study, it became clear that most press releases follow a very distinctive format or structure and that there is little divergence from the standard model. The norm is for press releases to begin with an announcement – the news the company wishes to disseminate – which is subsequently elaborated; this is then followed by comments from the CEO or another important figure; finally, the press release includes details of how to obtain further information. In some cases an additional section is appended, usually called “Editor’s note”, which provides additional information about very specific subjects mentioned in the main text e.g. background information about a company mentioned, or definitions of scientific or technical terms. This is the information the company thinks journalists may require when they come to adapt the press release for their own purposes i.e. when writing a follow-up press report, and is therefore included primarily for the benefit of journalists, rather than the other addressee group, investors. This part of the press release can run to several pages. The typical format of a press release is shown in Figure 1. Only the last element is optional.

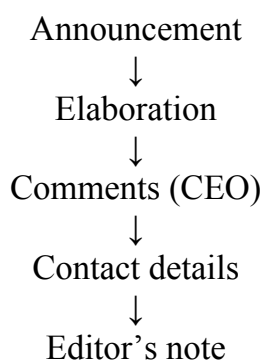


Figure 1. The standard format of a corporate press release

A short press release following this pattern is reproduced below as extract 1 for the purpose of illustration. This is a press release which was issued by Axis Shield on 30 July 2002 and in which the company announces that it has gained clearance from the US Food and Drug Administration for its new rheumatoid arthritis test.

1. Axis-Shield Gains FDA Clearance for New Rheumatoid Arthritis Test

Axis-Shield announces today that it has received Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval to market its new marker for the early detection of rheumatoid arthritis. With an estimated 2.1 million sufferers in the USA alone, rheumatoid arthritis is still a major crippling disease in the Western world. However, if detected at an early stage by more effective testing, new advances in drug treatment means that prognoses for patients is much better.

The test detects antibodies to cyclic citrullinated peptide (CCP) in blood samples allowing superior specificity and performance compared to current methods of detection. This efficacy has been demonstrated in global studies on over 2700 samples where the specificity was 98%, with a sensitivity of around 80%. The test is licensed from a Dutch consortium, principally the University of Neijmegen and developed in Dundee by Axis-Shield scientists. It has excited much interest among rheumatologists keen to identify and treat rheumatoid arthritics earlier in the disease process.

Svein Lien, Axis-Shield CEO, commented:

“We are very pleased that the test can now be sold in the key American market – we believe anti-CCP is a major step forward in the diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis and that its launch will strengthen our leadership position in testing for autoimmune disease. It illustrates well our commitment to marketing novel disease markers in areas of clinical need.”

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As can be seen here, the structure of this press release is clearly in line with that given in Figure 1:

1. In sentence 1 the announcement is made. The occurrence of the announcement in the first sentence is a standard feature of all press releases. In this example the news is that Axis-Shield has received approval from the FDA to market a new product, a marker for the early detection of rheumatoid arthritis. Furthermore, the semi-performative verb “announce” is used, as noted by Jacobs (1999a). This is virtually always the case, although other expressions (e.g. “is pleased to announce”; “is pleased to report”, etc.) may also be used.
2. In the rest of the first paragraph and the second paragraph we find the elaboration. This clearly accounts for a large portion of the press release, which again seems to be normal, at least from the evidence adduced from the analysis reported on here. We are given information about the uses of the test, the rationale behind the test and how the test actually works. This part of the press release also frequently provides information on the expected outcomes of the news being announced.
3. In the third paragraph comments from the CEO (or another relevant high-profile person) are reported in relation to the developments being announced. These comments are always very positive. It is in this part of the press release that we find the phenomenon of “self-quotation” (Jacobs 1999a), where the company quotes itself, or at least a member of its managerial staff (usually the CEO).
4. In the final section contact details are given of those who can provide more information on the company and the developments reported. This can either be contacts at the company itself or at a communications agency.

This is very much the typical structure of the corporate press releases comprising the corpus. There is very little variation. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that corporate press releases are highly conventional texts, responding to frequently recurring situations with a uniform purpose. As is noted by Flowerdew and Dudley-Evans (2002: 470), “It is generally agreed that the more conventional a genre is – that is, the more constrained its communicative purposes are – the more predictable will be its schematic structure”. Drawing on Giddens’s (1984) notion of social rules, Yates and Orlikowski (1992) talk about “genre rules” and posit that “genres are enacted through rules, which associate appropriate elements of form and substance with recurrent situations”, although they acknowledge that “A particular instance of a genre need not draw on all the rules constituting that genre” (Yates and Orlikowski 1992: 302). In the case of corporate press releases the schematic structure identified above would seem to be one aspect of the rules involved in the production (and reception) of such press releases. However, there

are other interesting regularities in press releases. Indeed, each of the component parts of a press release has its own characteristic linguistic and textural features. Although most genre studies have considered first and foremost the structural organisation of texts – according to Van Nus (1999), “as Fairclough (1992) argues, structural organisation has been given too much emphasis at the expense of other generic textual regularities” (Van Nus 1999: 193) – this study will go on in the next section to look at regularities at a linguistic, textual and pragmatic level.

4.2. Linking Format and Form: Textural Characteristics of the Structural Components

During the detailed analysis of the corpus it emerged that each of the structural components of the press release has its own characteristic textural features which can be related to the purpose of the structural component and to the role that component plays in the press release as a whole.

4.2.1. The Announcement and its Elaboration: Presentation of Facts

The function of the announcement and elaboration components would appear to be more informative than persuasive; this part of the press release is primarily expository in text typological terms (see, for example, Hatim and Mason 1990, 1997, and Werlich 1983). It is in this portion of the press release that facts are presented in relation to the developments being announced and this can lead to the presentation of often very technical details, especially in the elaboration, as is exemplified below. This is especially true where the topic of the press release is a clinical trial, as in extracts 2-3, and where consequently the text provides key scientific information. However, press releases on other topics are also characterised by a highly informative announcement and elaboration section in which a great deal of technical information may be given. This is reflected in extracts 4-5:

2. The randomised, double-blind trial enrolled 60 volunteers – 30 received the standard dose of Dryvax® and 30 were given an equivalent dose of ACAM1000. An immune response was assessed by the currently accepted indication of protective immunogenicity in the case of smallpox vaccination, which is the development of a pock-mark on the skin, known as a “take”. This was the primary endpoint of the trial. (Acambis, 3 September 2002)
3. Zavesca is an oral formulation of miglustat, a small molecule developed by OGS for the treatment of patients for whom Enzyme Replacement Therapy is unsuitable. (Oxford GlycoSciences, 26 July 2002)
4. Under the agreement signed yesterday, GEM Global Yield Fund Limited (“GEM Global”), the US based private investment group, has agreed to provide the Company with up to £5 million over the next two years in the form of an equity line of credit. (Osmetech, 28 September 2001)

5. Shire's only other US manufacturing facility, located in Valley Stream, New York, is in the process of being divested. At that facility, Shire manufactures immediate release ADDERALL ® and DEXTROSAT ®, two products that do not require specialty manufacturing and that contribute to just 10% of Shire's Group revenues. (Shire Pharmaceuticals, 13 September 2002)

As can be seen, this part of the press release is highly impersonal and is marked by the use of third-person self-reference, a feature of press releases noted by Jacobs (1999a, b). For instance in extract 5 Shire Pharmaceuticals constantly refers to itself in the third person when the use of the first person is possible, as illustrated below in a non-occurring example:

- 5.* Our only other US manufacturing facility, located in Valley Stream, New York, is in the process of being divested. At that facility, we manufacture immediate release ADDERALL ® and DEXTROSAT ®, two products that do not require specialty manufacturing and that contribute to just 10% of our revenues.

Third person reference is used in this manner for a number of reasons. Firstly, using third person self-reference forms means that journalists are not required to make any changes in terms of reference and point of view and thus helps them to meet the formal requirements of news reporting (this is what Jacobs 1999a, b calls the "tellability" of press releases). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the use of third person forms also gives the text an air of objectivity, of neutral detachment, and hence may be interpreted by all audience groups as carrying a degree of authority and reliability. As Jacobs (1999b) points out, "third person self-reference makes press releases look disinterested and neutral rather than self-interested, promotional... In contrast, the use of 'we' to refer to a business organisation has been called an advertising device..." (Jacobs 1999b: 232) and is used in very different genres.ⁱⁱⁱ

The texts are also characterised by the reporting of actions which have been undertaken and/or events which have taken place, with the result that actions and events are reported in the past tense. For instance, in extract 2 above we are told that "The randomised, double-blind trial enrolled 60 volunteers" and that "30 received the standard dose of Dryvax®", while "30 were given an equivalent dose of ACAM1000"; and in extract 4 readers are informed that under the agreement signed on 27 September 2001, "GEM Global Yield Fund Limited ("GEM Global"), the US based private investment group, has agreed to provide the Company with up to £5 million over the next two years in the form of an equity line of credit".

In these extracts we can also see a further typical feature of this section of press releases, which is the use of non-modalised categorical assertions. In other words, the writers opt not to modalise this part of the text with devices expressing high or low confidence in what is being said; rather, writers express their propositions as

categorical assertions (e.g. “You are right”, as opposed to “You must be right” or “You could be right”), thereby expressing the strongest possible degree of certainty in the truth of the propositions expressed. Events and actions are therefore presented as facts, as unquestionable, as unproblematic. In many cases this part of the press release displays additional features which have long been seen to characterise scientific discourse. Passives can be found in most of the extracts given above: examples include “An immune response was assessed by...” (extract 2); and “Shire’s only other US manufacturing facility, located in Valley Stream, New York, is in the process of being divested” (extract 5). The length and complexity of noun phrases is also noteworthy. In the above extracts significant examples include “The randomised, double-blind trial” and “the currently accepted indication of protective immunogenicity in the case of smallpox vaccination” (both in extract 2), “the US based private investment group” (extract 4), and so on.

The combined effect of these textural features – third person self-reference, reporting of actions in the past tense, and the use of categorical assertions – is above all an air of detachment and objectivity in this part of the press release.

4.2.2. Interpretation and Positive Evaluation: Comments from the CEO

If press releases were entirely objective reports of developments, however, they would not fulfil their objective of persuading investors of the merits of the company. Successfully fulfilling this aim is vital to the survival of biotechnology companies. As a result, press releases also evaluate the company and the activities or developments reported, and, unsurprisingly, this evaluation is entirely positive. Positive evaluation is the purpose of the CEO’s comments above all; these comments are designed to provide an interpretation or an analysis of the facts and developments previously presented. The result is that, overall, press releases tend to evaluate the company and its activities (whatever is being reported) in a very favourable light.

The positive evaluation which characterises the CEO’s comments is evident from the very outset in that they tend to start with expressions such as “We are delighted that...” or “We are pleased that...”, regardless of the news being announced. There is relatively little variation in this respect. What then follows is in very much the same vein with the news of the moment (i.e. the topic of the press release) being reported in highly positive terms. Typical examples of CEOs’ comments are given in extracts 6-8 below:

6. “We are delighted that we have met our targets in completing the build of our Tullamore facility on time and to budget, and have now established a strong operating and management team. We see this as the first in a number of milestones we expect to complete this year: we plan to expand our product range, further increase our manufacturing capabilities and conclude a deal with a major European marketing partner. We are confident that this state-of-the-art manufacturing plant will help to establish our position as a

leading supplier of high quality, cost effective generic biopharmaceuticals.” (GeneMedix, 24 June 2002)

7. Christopher Pearce, Chief Executive of Proteome Sciences said: “We are very encouraged by the excellent results obtained from the University Cantonal Hospital, Geneva in specificity and predictive accuracy for the stroke test. This should accelerate the rapid development of a blood test for clinical applications and will allow us to concentrate our research more fully on differentiating between the two types of stroke, haemorrhagic and ischaemic. In combination with our collaboration with ReNeuron plc, this gives Proteome Sciences a major mandate in the field of stroke diagnosis, prognosis and drug targets for therapeutic treatment.” (Proteome Sciences, 1 May 2002)
8. Commenting on this announcement, Phil Gould, Chief Executive of Provalis plc, said, “This is another significant endorsement for our Glycosal product. This opportunity will give immediate sales, of both instruments and tests, in a large number of major accounts in both doctor’s office and hospital laboratory sectors in the USA, as well as increasing visibility of Glycosal within the USA. This is an excellent platform from which to grow this product.” (Provalis, 25 July 2002)

These extracts, and other examples of CEOs’ comments from the corpus, are littered with positively evaluative expressions. These include, to name but a few, “this state-of-the-art manufacturing plant”, “a leading supplier of high quality, cost effective generic biopharmaceuticals” and “a strong operating and management team” (all extract 6); “the excellent results” (extract 7); “another significant endorsement” and “an excellent platform” (extract 8), etc.

Also, as can be seen from the extracts, we find in this part of the press release the use of first-person self-reference forms. This is because the speaker in these cases is explicitly identified and therefore there is no confusion about whose words are being reported. Journalists can just as easily copy this part of the press release into their articles as they can the initial part containing the announcement and the elaboration. This is important because this portion of the press release, as noted previously, provides an interpretation of the news reported, an assessment which the company hopes will be accepted by the final recipients of the press release, namely investors.

In the vast majority of cases it is the second person plural pronoun *we* (and to a lesser extent also the pronoun *us*) and the possessive adjective *our* which are used. This is reflected above. In all such cases *we* refers to the company: it is the corporate *we* or institutional *we*, an exclusive use of *we* to refer to the organisation, rather than *we* used inclusively to refer to writer and reader. Through the use of the plural pronoun, the CEO signals that the interpretation of the news given and the

evaluation drawn represent the reaction or the viewpoint of the company as a whole, rather than just the CEO.

The comments made by the CEO and quoted in the press release also involve “self-quotation” (Jacobs e.g. 1999a) or “pseudo-direct speech” (Bell 1991). Thus, the company effectively quotes itself and, in the introduction of the quotation, names the interviewee (the CEO), and refers to him/her as an external party, as a journalist would.

4.2.3. Evaluation, Expectation and Speculation

One of the most interesting and striking features of the data analysed here, particularly the CEO’s comments, is the combination we find of linguistic and pragmatic features with opposing functions: on the one hand, the press releases are positively evaluative, praising the company for its progress, but on the other hand, the writers of press releases hedge the claims they make because they are required to speculate on the uncertain – future progress, results, and so on – with the result that there is a significant tendency towards the use of expressions of uncertainty. These include modal verbs, lexical verbs which are non-factive, in other words “which do *not* presuppose the truth of what they govern” (Simpson 1993: 154, italics in original), and a whole range of items which invoke possibility, expectation, and prediction. Unlike other business genres such as corporate brochures in which certainty and positivity are the prevailing characteristics (see, for instance, McLaren 1999), press releases issued by biotechnology companies display evidence of the difficult balancing act companies have to undertake.

For example, we find with considerable frequency references to expectations, predictions and projections about the future. Such references occur both in the first part of press releases (i.e. the announcement and its elaboration) and the CEO’s comments. The following extracts are typical examples of statements involving expectations:

9. Osmetech expects to file for this approval by the end of April 2002. (Osmetech, 11 March 2002)
10. We expect that this initiative will spark great interest amongst our customers and will enhance Cytomyx’ [sic] position as a highly valued partner in drug discovery. (Cytomyx, CEO, 9 September 2002)
11. Results from this second trial are expected to be available shortly. (Acambis, 3 September 2002)

In all of these cases the verb “to expect” is used in some form. The suggestion is that, although likely to occur, the future developments mentioned are subject to external factors outside the company’s control, and as such are not certain to occur. A degree of doubt or uncertainty is therefore conveyed and the message to

investors is that, although the company is optimistic about the future, there can be no cast-iron guarantees. This same meaning and stance on the part of the company can also be conveyed by other expressions, as can be seen in extracts 12-14:

12. ... completion of the SMART trial is most likely to take place during the second half of 2004. (Antisoma, 20 August 2002)
13. the project is on track to deliver by the end of 2002. (Acambis, 2 April 2002)
14. Cytomyx is well placed to create such products, which address the market's need. (Cytomyx, CEO, 4 April 2002)

In these examples we find a number of adjectival expressions: “is likely to” + verb (extract 12), “is on track to” + verb (extract 13), “is well placed to” + verb (extract 14), etc. The making of references of this type allows the company to make positive statements, but without committing itself fully to the successful completion of whatever is mentioned. The same function may also be fulfilled by references to possibility, which may take a number of different forms:

15. The results will indicate at an early stage the potential therapeutic effectiveness of these compounds in these specific issues. (Pharmagene, 17 September 2002)
16. We are excited by the possibility that, together, our powerful technologies could assist in exploring new mechanisms of disease intervention in allergy. (CAT, CEO, 13 August 2002)
17. It [early product profiling] may also save costs since many development candidates fail in the clinic despite the preclinical results and significant investment. (Pharmagene, 17 September 2002)

References to possibility include use of adjectives, adverbs and nouns (e.g. “potential” in extract 15, “possibility” in extract 16), but may also include a range of modal verbs which suggest a high degree of uncertainty, including notably “may” (as in extract 17) and “could” (extract 16), or even some combination of devices which are “modally harmonic” i.e. which “are used to convey the same degree of commitment” (Simpson 1993: 152), such as “possibility” and “could” in extract 16. In these instances it would once again appear that claims are being made by the company about what are potentially highly significant developments, most frequently breakthroughs and important progress in product development, but that they are hedged. Companies are clearly not in a position to make categorical claims, but wish, indeed need, to make some kind of statement on the subject in order to keep the community of investors interested, reassured, and willing to invest. As a result, companies find themselves obliged to say something positive,

but in a manner in which they cannot be held to account if their hopes, expectations or intentions are not fulfilled.

Nonetheless, we do find in press releases considerable use of the modal verb “will” which suggests a not insignificant degree of commitment on the part of the writer to the truth of the statement made. Consider the following extracts:

18. CAT and Xerion will explore and evaluate the therapeutic potential of a cell surface protein known to play a role in allergic reactions in man. (CAT, 13 August 2002)
19. Nycomed and KSB will co-fund the development of products for each indication and Nycomed will be responsible for product registration and marketing of TransMID™ in the licensed territory. (KS Biomedix, 17 September 2002)
20. The project will be funded by a Phase I Small Business Innovation Research grant issued by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. (Sequenom, 24 August 2000)

All of these cases occur in the main section of the press release, namely what we have termed above the elaboration of the announcement. “Will” is clearly used to indicate future tense, but the degree of certainty is much higher than in cases where, for example, there is reference to expectation: in all of the above cases we are told that X will happen – there is no doubt, no hesitation, no question mark. The use of “will” in this manner and thus the higher degree of certainty or confidence on the part of the writer is much less a feature of the CEO’s comments than the elaboration section. This may be because in the elaboration, as noted above, the company tends to report facts which are objective, uncontroversial and relatively certain. The CEO’s comments, on the other hand, are perhaps the most positively evaluative section of the press release – it is here that the most significant claims are made – and so it may also be in this part of the press release that the extent to which hedging occurs is highest.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to explore the main features of one specific business genre, namely corporate press releases, and to relate those features to issues of context and pragmatics. The data for examination were drawn from the biotechnology sector, an industry which continues to experience uncertainty, fluctuations in fortune, and controversy in the UK. As has been shown, a number of consistencies or trends were found to characterise the press releases which constitute the corpus.

Firstly, in terms of format or structure, there is a standard pattern which all press releases in the corpus follow. This consists of a number of “moves”, “steps” or

“components”, namely an announcement, which is followed by an elaboration of that announcement, followed in turn by comments from the CEO or another important figure, which is followed finally by contact details or information about how to obtain further information. In some cases an “Editor’s note” also features at the very end, which gives extra information (e.g. about the company) and/or definitions of technical expressions. Only the very last component noted here is optional; all other components appear to be obligatory. This format would appear to be highly conventionalised in the UK biotechnology sector and the same format probably characterises corporate press releases generally, although this requires confirmation through empirical, text-based study. Although not all press releases will follow the standard pattern to the letter, they will do so to a greater or lesser degree.

Secondly, the analysis pointed to the occurrence of certain textural features noted by Jacobs (e.g. 1999a) to be examples of the “metapragmatics of press releases” (e.g. third person self-reference, self-quotation, etc.) and to the fact that these and other features are more common in certain parts of the press releases than in others, in accordance with the different purposes the various components are designed to fulfil. The main body of the press release, for example, which includes the announcement and the elaboration, is relatively more information-oriented, and thus impartial, than the CEO’s comments which are more evaluative (positively so) and subjective. These different functions lead to different choices from the available language resources. The announcement and elaboration, for example, tend to be concerned with technical or scientific detail and consequently use many categorical assertions and some modal markers which suggest certainty (e.g. the modal “will”). There may be some expression of uncertainty or expectation in this part of the text, but it is mainly the case that in this portion of the press release certainty prevails. This contrasts with the CEO’s comments which are highly evaluative, interpretive, and also speculative, with the result that they include not only judgement and evaluation (positive self-assessment and self-praise), but also hedging, as the writer attempts to balance the need to make positive claims about the company and its progress on the one hand, with the need on the other to acknowledge the risks associated with the biotechnology sector and the company’s activities, and hence also with investment in the company. Expressions are therefore used to minimise claims, to limit the degree of writer commitment to the truth of those claims. This combination of textural features allows the company to make important claims, but in a non-committal manner. Such a strategy is directly related to the purpose of press releases and their target audience: biotechnology companies, indeed all companies, need to project a positive corporate image as part of their strategy to persuade new investors to invest, and to reassure existing investors that their funds are safe, but they must also be realistic and acknowledge the uncertainties of the sector in which they operate, and hence the risky nature of investment.

The fact that there was so little variation found between the press releases included in the corpus may suggest that this is a highly conventionalised and indeed static

genre. In this respect corporate press releases clearly differ from other, more creative genres (e.g. advertisements) whose defining characteristic is to be innovative, expectation-defying and dynamic. The norms or conventions discussed here may, however, only be valid for English-language corporate press releases, British English-language corporate press releases, or even solely for British biotechnology company press releases, although this is probably not the case. Further research is clearly required to establish, firstly, whether all English-language corporate press releases fulfil the same generic norms, and, secondly, whether the genre of the corporate press release is one that is textualised in a similar manner across languages and cultures.

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ⁱ This study clearly contrasts with much research in linguistics and pragmatics on business communication which has tended to look in particular at different types of letter, notably in relation to interpersonal dynamics and factors of politeness, such as power and social distance (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1996; Kessapidu, 1997; Limaye and Cherry, 1987; Pilegaard, 1997; Yli-Jokipii, 1996). The focus in such studies tends to be on interaction between individuals within a business context. By contrast, communication between organisations and the outside world, or at least audiences who are external to the company, has tended to be overlooked. This point is made also by Jacobs (1999a) who notes that "... until recently, the focus was on communication-*within*-organisations", while the "capacity to communicate as an organisation... was strangely ignored. Indeed, for a long time, organisations were looked at as machines or as systems, and until today issues of discourse and pragmatics have remained largely underemphasised (Taylor and Cooren, 1997)" (Jacobs, 1999a: 3-4).

ⁱⁱ It must be acknowledged that this is a small corpus by comparison with the very large machine-readable corpora used today in corpus linguistics. However, as will be shown, the features discussed here as conventional were found to recur to such an extent that this corpus may in fact be seen to be sufficiently large. As Milroy (1987) notes in respect of the representativeness of samples used in linguistic surveys, "it seems to be generally true that very consistent patterns emerge even with a very small sample, provided that it was systematically selected" (1987: 27).

ⁱⁱⁱ Rogers and Swales (1990), for example, look at "how corporations refer to themselves ... in the formal expression of their ethical philosophy and policies" (1990: 294) and find that the ethical code of a large US company, the Dana Corporation, is characterised by the use of the first person pronoun *we*, which is used inclusively to refer to writer and reader, suggesting cooperation between writer and reader and creating "an idealised environment in which all participants, regardless of their relative power, are working together to achieve the company's roles" (1990: 301).

ABSTRACT

Characterising the Genre of the Corporate Press Release

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This article discusses the findings of a study which aimed to investigate the conventions of corporate press releases in English. The data consisted of a corpus of approximately 50 press releases issued by biotechnology companies in the UK. The analysis, which adopted a qualitative approach based primarily on work in genre analysis, text linguistics and pragmatics, focused on two main areas: the structure or format of company press releases, and characteristic linguistic and pragmatic features. Clear trends emerged, which will be discussed and exemplified, and an attempt will be made to link textual conventions to contextual features of the genre, such as the purpose of press releases and characteristics of the text users (producers and receivers).
