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**'It's not good saying "Well it it might do that or it might not":  
Hypothetical Reported Speech in Business Meetings**

**Abstract**

This article examines the use of directed reported speech in business meetings that is framed by the speaker as hypothetical. While the past two decades have seen many empirical studies on direct reported speech (DRS) in spoken interactions, fewer have focused specifically on hypothetical reported speech (HRS). This study identifies and examines the discourse patterns and sequences used to perform HRS in a 1-million-word corpus of business interactions, and explores the reasons why HRS is used. As such, it is the first study to locate and examine this discourse phenomenon across a spoken business corpus. Through the application of an original methodology, HRS was found to occur as part of specific sequential patterns, and was used largely as a persuasive device, fulfilling a range of related rhetorical functions. Like DRS, HRS can project either a sense of involvement or detachment, but unlike DRS, also allows speakers to generalize; detachment and generalizability being particularly relevant to a business context. The research provides a theoretical contribution on the use of HRS, indicating that HRS is used strategically in professional contexts, often by senior employees, not only to persuade others but also to bring about change in action relevant to the professional practice of the organisation.

Keywords: business meetings, spoken corpus, hypothetical reported speech

**1. INTRODUCTION**

When speakers use direct reported speech (DRS) in discourse, it is presented as an exact reproduction of speech that occurred in a different context from the current one. However, some instances of DRS ‘quote’ utterances that have never happened, but are projected as hypothetical in an imaginary world or as possible in a future situation, e.g.:

#### Extract 1

I mean I would never say “you will be doing this an’ that and the other”, ... I’d say, “at the moment the plans might be to”.

In this example, the first instance of DRS (‘I would *never say* ...’) is counter-factual and thus projected into an imaginary/hypothetical world, while the second example (‘I’d say...’) is at the same time hypothetical and possible. The speaker also clearly indicates which of these two hypothetical scenarios is desirable. We will refer to such examples as hypothetical reported speech (HRS), following Myers’ (1999b) term “hypothetical reported discourse”.

This article examines the use of hypothetical reported speech in a 1-million-word corpus of business interactions (primarily face to face meetings) – the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus (CANBEC)<sup>1</sup>. In this corpus, HRS occurred frequently, especially within particular meetings. However, there did not seem to be any text-external contextual patterns shared across the meetings where it was most frequent: it occurred in both internal and external meetings, in a wide range of companies (e.g. pharmaceutical, manufacturing, IT), in negotiations, technical discussions and sales meetings, and across meetings involving senior management and managers and subordinates. The question therefore arises as to why speakers use these hypothetical ‘direct quotations’ in such a wide range of contexts, what functions they perform within these contexts, and whether there are any contextual patterns that emerge from the textual analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Copyright Cambridge University Press. Project directors Professor Ronald Carter and Professor Michael McCarthy. See Handford, 2010.

While some previous studies of HRS have looked at institutional or professional contexts, Koester's is the only one to examine spoken business discourse. It examines HRS in a particular sub-set of meetings in CANBEC: those involving negotiations. The current study explores the phenomenon of HRS in the whole CANBEC meetings corpus, and is thus broader in scope, allowing us to comment on the frequency and use in a variety of contexts of this under-examined yet widespread discourse feature. Despite the range of meeting contexts represented in the corpus, the study showed that HRS was used in a way that is distinct from its uses in non-business contexts and clearly linked to the speakers' professional and organizational practices. It was used overwhelmingly to effect some change in action relevant to the particular context of the business meeting, as will be discussed in more detail in the article.

In reviewing previous work on reported speech in interaction, Clift and Holt (2007) pinpoint three main themes:

1. forms of reported speech
2. the authenticity of reported speech
3. What does reported speech do?

This paper will mainly address the first and the third themes through an analysis of HRS in spoken business discourse, and as such is the first to examine HRS across a representative corpus of meetings. Corpus linguistics can be employed to find many of the lexico-grammatical items used to introduce HRS, and a close analysis of the discursive contexts of HRS can help us understand its sequential unfolding across longer stretches of interaction. Nevertheless, the limitations of concordance-based corpus tools in both locating a discourse feature with a variety of linguistic forms and in providing a contextually rich explanation are evidenced in this study; an original methodology is therefore developed to overcome these limitations.

In terms of authenticity, while HRS by definition is clearly not 'real', it frames the ensuing utterance in meaningful ways and is employed for rhetorical and strategic purposes. This leads on to the third point: by analyzing extracts from a range of meetings, we will show that HRS in business fulfils several related functions, affects the frame of the discourse, and can be

employed to craft persuasive messages. In other words, through a fine-grained analysis, we further the understanding of this intriguing linguistic feature in an important workplace genre. Specifically, we will answer the following research questions:

1. What discourse patterns and sequences are most frequently used to perform HRS?
2. How and why is Hypothetical Reported Speech (HRS) used in spoken professional discourse?

While our analysis confirms previous findings on HRS, we also identify some discourse patterns and sequences that have not hitherto been focused on, thus making an empirical contribution to this body of work. As indicated above, we also propose distinct reasons why HRS is used by speakers, particularly senior staff, in a business context, thus contributing to the theoretical understanding of HRS usage and business discourse. Furthermore, in the conclusion we will briefly evaluate this hybrid methodology in terms of its usefulness for identifying and analysing a feature of discourse (HRS) that is not constituted solely by a fixed or semi-fixed lexico-grammatical item. The methodology combines corpus linguistic tools to locate frequent lexico-grammatical patterns, with discourse analysis to identify both further lexicogrammatical patterns in the corpus and sequential patterns within extended interactions.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Before explicitly addressing our research questions, it is relevant to review what previous studies have revealed about the form and function of DRS in general and HRS in particular. The literature review is structured around the 'three main themes' (forms, authenticity and functions of DRS/HRS) identified by Clift and Holt (2007) as discussed above, and begins with a brief review of narrative and non-narrative studies of DRS and HRS in a range of contexts.

The past two decades have seen a great number of empirical studies on direct reported speech (DRS) in spoken interactions, largely focusing on its use in conversational narratives (Holt 1996; Sams 2010). Other studies have explored the use of DRS in institutional settings, again mainly looking at narratives (Buttny 1997; Holt 2000; Clayman 2007; Wooffitt 2007).

Meanwhile, some studies have also examined non-narrative uses of DRS (e.g. Clift 2006; Couper-Kuhlen 2007). While these have mostly been of everyday conversation, some institutional contexts have also been examined, for example classroom discourse (Baynham 1996), focus group discussions (Myers 1999a and 1999b) and performing magicians (Jones 2010).

Hypothetical reported speech (HRS) has been explored in a number of studies, though far less extensively than DRS, for example by Mayes (1990), Buttny (1997), Myers (1999a and 1999b), Jones (2010), Sams (2010), Simmons and Le Couteur (2011), Golato (2012) and Koester (2014).

## **2.1 What forms and discourse patterns are most frequently used to perform DRS/HRS?**

Clift and Holt (2007: 5), reviewing previous research on reported speech (RS) in English - both DRS and indirect reported speech (IRS) - state that *pronoun + say* is “the paradigmatic introductory component of reported speech”. They reference Tannen (1989), who surveys other terms used in quotatives, including ‘tell’, ‘go’ and ‘like’, and argues that ‘say’ is the default choice. McCarthy (1998), in analysing one million words of the CANCODE corpus of everyday British spoken discourse, also found that ‘say’ and its lexemes are used far more commonly than other items, such as ‘tell’, ‘read’, ‘shout’, ‘suggest’ and ‘ask’, to introduce DRS. Moreover, unlike other verbs which only appear in the initial position in relation to the reported message, ‘say’ may appear in initial, medial and final position. More recent corpus studies (Barbieri and Eckhardt, 2007, Buchstaller 2014) confirm the use of ‘say’ as

'default' reporting verb, but also found 'be like' and 'go' to be very frequent in some conversational genres.<sup>2</sup> The beginning of the DRS quotation is often introduced with a discourse marker (Biber et al. 1999: 1118-9), for example 'Oh' as in 'I said "Oh I'm sorry"' (McCarthy, 1998: 159; also Myers, 1999b: 575) or 'Well' (Cooper-Kuhlen, 2007: 87), meaning that DRS is commonly performed by the pattern *pronoun + say + "discourse marker + message"*. Similar patterns were found in instances of HRS (Myers 1999b; Holt 2007,); in addition Simmons and LeCouteur (ibid.) observe the frequent insertion of 'y'know' before the hypothetical quote.

We draw on such patterns identified by previous studies to introduce DRS in the corpus analysis; additionally, we searched for forms that specifically mark out the RS as hypothetical. While a range of studies have used corpus methods to investigate both IRS and DRS in speech and writing (Biber et al. 1999: 1118-9; Barbieri and Eckhardt 2007; Semino and Short 2004), few have dealt specifically with HRS, apart from Semino and Short, who identified hypothetical cases in just 4% of their examples (see also Semino et al. 1999).

## 2.2 Is DRS/HRS real?

In comparing DRS and HRS, it is legitimate to ask whether DRS accurately reports what was said. Voloshinov (1971) was perhaps the first to question the apparent verisimilitude of DRS, arguing that the act of reporting the original utterance in a different context necessarily changes the meaning. Tannen (1989: 21), in a similar vein, argues that the term 'reported speech' is misleading, as "whenever a speaker frames an utterance as dialogue, the discourse thus framed is first and foremost the speaker's creation". She therefore proposes the term "constructed dialogue" (see also Pascual, 2014 on 'fictive interaction').

This is an important insight, and psycholinguistic research apparently supports the claim regarding speakers' inability to repeat verbatim others' words (Lerner 1989, cited in Clift and Holt 2007). Nevertheless, some

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<sup>2</sup> In the TOEFL 2000 Spoken and Written Academic Language corpus 'be like' is the most frequent present tense reporting verb in two of four conversational genres: service encounters and study groups (Barbieri and Eckardt 2007).

utterances are more constructed than others: while certain constructed, or reported or quoted utterances are at least based on previously produced language and contexts, others involve representations of “words that were not, could not, or might not have been spoken”. (Myers, 1999b: 571).

Mayes (1990) suggests that DRS can be interpreted on a cline, ranging from plausible to improbable to impossible quotations. Applying two criteria, “internal” (involving aspects of the lexico-grammar used in DRS) and “situational” (for example whether the speaker was a participant in the quoted conversation), she found that at least 50% of the instances of DRS were invented by the speaker.

Just as Mayes proposes degrees of plausibility for DRS, Myers (1999b) states that there are three types of hypothetical discourse (HRS): imaginary, possible and impossible. However, whereas Mayes analyses talk that is framed to be interpreted as factual, Myers, is concerned with RS that is overtly hypothetical, as are we in the present study.

## **2.3 How and why is DRS/HRS used in spoken discourse?**

### **2.3.1 Functions of DRS**

One common theme in many studies of DRS is that it never involves neutral reporting, but always puts some kind of evaluative slant on the reported utterance (Buttny 1997; Holt 2000; Mayes 1990; Myers 1999a). A number of studies have also found DRS to be capable of performing two apparently opposing functions of involving (e.g. through dramatization, see Tannen 2007) on the one hand, and distancing/detachment (e.g. by providing external evidence) on the other (Buttny 1997; Myers 1999a). For example, Buttny found that in talking about race, DRS tended to portray out-group members negatively, in other words an instance of distancing. These themes are discussed further in 4.2.2 in exploring the interpersonal functions of HRS in CANBEC.

In contrast to earlier findings that DRS and HRS are typically (though not exclusively) used in narratives, the large majority of instances of HRS in



our data occur in non-narrative exchanges. According to Couper-Kuhlen (2007: 82), non-narrative reported speech “is frequently incorporated into assessments and accounts as a means of heightening evidentiality” (see also Holt 1996 and Mayes 1990), and Mayes argues that courtroom lawyers use DRS because of the “popular assumption that direct quotes are more exact and more reliable” than IRS (ibid.: 354). These findings suggest that the function of distancing/detachment is particularly relevant in non-narrative uses of DRS/HRS. However, other findings point to involvement also playing a role in particular institutional contexts: in examining DRS in mathematics classes, Baynham (1996) finds that teachers use non-narrative reported speech as a pedagogic device to reformulate students’ utterances and also maintain involvement.

### 2.3.2 Functions of HRS

Direct reported speech used in hypothetical scenarios has been found to perform a range of non-narrative functions frequently tied closely to the overall function of the discourse in question, for example focus groups discussions (Myers 1999b) or therapy sessions (Simmons and Le Couteur 2011).

Functions of HRS identified in different studies cross a range of situations include modelling the discourse of others and various rhetorical functions, such as backing a claim (Myers 1999b; Simmons and Le Couteur 2011; Golata 2012; Koester 2014). Simmons and Le Couteur found that therapists use “hypothetical active voicing” (as they call HRS) in the context of advice-giving to model hypothetical talk that the clients could use in a future situation. It is thus an example of HRS that is future-oriented. In negotiations, HRS is used primarily as a rhetorical persuasive device at key stages of the negotiation, but also as a way of creating rapport with business partners or clients by voicing the imaginary words or thoughts of the interlocutor and thus show affiliation or understanding (Koester 2014).

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

Drawing on Li (1986), Mayes (1990) lists five features of interaction that indicate the utterance in question is RS: (1) pronominalization, (2) place and time deixis, (3) verb tense, (4) presence of the complementizer *that*, (5) intonation. As our data is already transcribed, we only consider the first three, plus (4) when it is necessary to distinguish between direct and indirect speech. Furthermore, many of the instances of DRS are signalled through the use of speech marks, which transcribers of the corpus had employed based on the intonation of the speakers. Moreover, many of the instances of DRS (see extracts 2--10) begin with a discourse marker (McCarthy 1998; Biber et al. 1999; Tannen 2007), and this could be seen as a sixth feature, which also allows the utterance to be identified as DRS as opposed to IRS.

However, as we were specifically interested in those examples of DRS that were hypothetical or counterfactual, we needed to search for further features which would mark these out as HRS. Previous examinations of CANBEC and the ABOT<sup>3</sup> Corpus (Handford 2010, Koester 2010, respectively) had identified two distinct patterns which often introduce a stretch of HRS:

- 1) *if* + personal pronoun + reporting verb, e.g. *if you say*
- 2) *somebody/someone* + reporting verb, e.g. *somebody says*

Handford (2010) found that *if* is statistically significant in spoken business discourse compared to everyday discourse, and that the cluster *if you* 'is used to speculate, or to create a notion of irrealis' (p. 199), and therefore frequently prefaces HRS (pp.198-200). Koester (2010) identified the second pattern as "a semi-lexicalized phrase with a pragmatic specialization for projecting hypothetical scenarios" (p.86) typically involving HRS.

An iterative approach was used in our analysis, moving from corpus linguistic analysis to manual analysis of corpus examples in context and back to corpus analysis. Initially, the above two patterns were searched for using the concordancing programme WordSmith Tools (Version 5) in the 57 meetings of the CANBEC corpus, totalling 912,734 words. A range of reporting verbs were searched for with *if*... and *somebody/someone*... patterns: all lemmas of *say* (*say, says, said*) and present tense forms of *ask/go/think*, as well as the expression *turn (round/around) and say*. The verbs *come/ring/call* were

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<sup>3</sup> Corpus of American and British Office Talk (see Author 1 2010).

also searched for in combination with these patterns, as initial searches showed that these verbs frequently occurred in the context of speech reporting. Studying the results from these searches within their discourse contexts led to the identification of further patterns as instances of HRS frequently seemed to ‘cluster together’ within interactions. Furthermore, a single meeting was analysed in its entirety for instances of HRS, revealing yet more patterns. These patterns were then also searched for systematically in the corpus. This revealed that, in addition to the above two patterns, modal verbs together with a reporting verb, (e.g. *I could say*) were frequently used to introduce HRS, as summarized in 4.1.

While we cannot claim to have identified all the ways in which HRS is expressed in the corpus, we believe to have identified many of the most frequent patterns using this iterative method, thus achieving a higher level of recall than would otherwise be the case. Overt signals, such as reporting verbs, are not always used to introduce HRS, and therefore a comprehensive identification of the phenomenon in the corpus would have required manual tagging, which in a corpus of 1 million words would not have been practicable for the purposes of this study.

Having identified a range of patterns introducing HRS, we then chose 10 examples of each of the three frequently occurring patterns identified above (thus a total of 30 examples) to investigate more fully within their discursive contexts, ensuring that the examples were from a range of meetings within various organisations. The analysis involved a close examination of the construction of turns containing HRS and sequential patterns leading up to and following such turns. It was often necessary to examine quite extended segments of interaction in order to discover the sequential patterns within which HRS was deployed. In order to explore how speakers set the scene for hypothetical scenarios which feature HRS, we also draw on Goffman’s notions of “footing” and “frame”. According to Goffman, “footing” is the interactive alignment taken up in talk and expressed in the production/reception of an utterance (1981), and “frame” is the definition discourse participants give to the ongoing social activity (1974). As we will show, HRS involves a change in footing and a shift into a hypothetical frame.

In analysing the ‘discursive work’ performed by HRS in the business meetings, we found classical rhetorical categories useful in devising a systematic framework for the various functions identified.

#### 4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS: HRS IN BUSINESS MEETINGS

##### 4.1 What discourse patterns are most frequently used to perform HRS in CANBEC?

In addition to the three main patterns which frequently introduce a stretch of HRS, as discussed above, one further pattern involving negative forms was identified through the corpus searches. Table 1 lists and exemplifies each pattern, indicates the number of times it occurred and the numbers of the data extracts discussed in the article in which this pattern is found.

Table 1: HRS patterns in CANBEC

Pattern	Examples	Frequency	Data extract
Modal verb + <i>say</i>	<i>I would never say</i> <i>I can't go... and say</i>	159	1 10
<i>If</i> + personal pronoun + reporting verb	<i>if you and me say</i> <i>if I do so I say</i>	79	7 10
<i>somebody/someone</i> + reporting verb	<i>somebody... turns up...</i> <i>and says</i> <i>someone says</i>	22	6 8
Negative forms: <i>don't + say</i> (e.g. imperative)	<i>don't turn round and say</i>	11	--

<i>no/not good saying</i>	<i>it's not good saying</i>		7
<b>Total</b>		<b>271</b>	

The most frequently used reporting verb by far across the whole corpus was *say* (83 instances) but *think*, *ask*, *go* and *turn (round/around) and say* also occurred. The verbs *ring (up)* and *come (along/on)* were also found, usually in combination with *say*, as was the expression *turn up and say*, for example :

- *If er somebody rings up and says "I've smashed me step lift up"*
- *Somebody ... who suddenly turns up on the doorstep and says "Right. I've got a job here now and I'm working" (extract 6)*

As the first example above illustrates, *somebody/someone* was often preceded by *if*, meaning that the two patterns (*If ...* and *somebody/someone...* ) in fact often combined (see also extracts 4 and 5).

In order to restrict the amount of data in searches for HRS introduced by modals, the only reporting verb searched for with this pattern was *say*. The following modals, semi-modals and quasi-modals were found to introduce HRS: *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *might*, *going to/gonna*, *have to/gotta*, *should*, *ought to*, *want to/wanna*, *tend to*. Other negative forms (besides those used with modals), such as negative imperatives, were also searched for, as it was felt that these were likely to introduce direct speech presented as counter-factual or undesirable, and therefore hypothetical.

While the corpus findings showed that certain meetings contained more examples of HRS than others, it was also apparent that HRS was very widespread across the corpus, occurring in over 80% of the meetings (46 of 57). As mentioned above, there was often clustering of HRS in meetings, and closer inspection of the discourse context of corpus examples threw up further uses of DRS and HRS. This indicated that not all examples of HRS had been identified through the corpus searches; for example reporting verbs were not always used:

Extract 2

Cos if they work it out “Oh we're paying thirty three how come they've got”

To get some indication of the extent of HRS not following the patterns already identified, we analysed one meeting in its entirety for HRS. This internal management meeting, comprising approximately 22,500 words of data, was chosen because corpus searches turned up a high density of HRS. Using a manual search, we identified 59 instances of HRS, half of which followed the patterns identified through the corpus searches. A large variety of other forms occurred prefacing HRS, including, for example:

- *like you say to X...*
- *and you kind of think ...*

As illustrated in the above examples, other markers of hypotheticality found were hedges (*sort of, kind of*) and expressions introducing an example (*like, for example*). However, there were often no explicit markers of the RS being hypothetical, and this was only apparent from the discourse context. Typically, such unmarked uses of HRS occurred in the immediate vicinity of more explicitly marked instances and/or in the context of an extended hypothetical scenario for example:

#### Extract 3

So you come to me and say “Oh hi [company name] you're great. Er here's my cash”

Here the participants are discussing how a particular procedure involving a customer could work, and they therefore run through a number of hypothetical situations.

There were 16 instances of HRS in the meeting simply using present tense forms of *say* and *think*, for example:

*and they say*

*customer thinks*

There is, nevertheless, a subtle formal clue in these examples in that the present tense reporting verbs mark the speech report as general (and by implication hypothetical), rather than specific (and therefore reported). A systematic search of the corpus for one such pattern - *and* + pronoun + *say/think* - identified 36 occurrences involving HRS. This gives some indication of how widespread such uses of HRS, where hypotheticality is not explicitly marked, are likely to be.

We also analysed the frequency and type of discourse markers used in opening HRS in this meeting, for instance in extract 2 above the HRS opens with the discourse marker *Oh*. Around 60% of HRS instances in the meeting began with a discourse marker, and over half of these were either *Well*, *Oh* or *Right*. There are several instances of these in the examples we examine below.

## **4.2 How and why is HRS used in spoken professional discourse?**

### **4.2.1 HRS and sequential patterns**

As explained in the methodology section, 30 examples of HRS were studied within their discursive contexts in order to analyse the sequential patterns and the functions of HRS within specific contexts of use. In this section, the findings from this analysis are summarised and exemplified.

#### Sequential and interactive patterns in which HRS is used

Although HRS is used in a range of interactive contexts and was found to perform a variety of functions, some recurring patterns were nevertheless observed in the interactive turn and sequence construction of talk containing HRS.

First, HRS involves a change in footing where the speaker shifts into a hypothetical 'frame'. Such frames are often signalled overtly through the use of one of the formal patterns or clusters for introducing HRS discussed above:

Extract 4

1. S5: Just just so I know who you are?
2. S4: I'm C T O at Max Mouse Systems.
3. S5: Right.
4. S4: And also advise clients erm on sort of technical side of their enquiries.
5. S5: Right.
6. S4: So if someone calls up and asks for a particular solution I'll sort of draw down and say "Well why why are you actually going for that?" and+
7. S5: Okay.
8. S4: +erm "[company name] the place to be for that sort of system" or whatever.
9. S5: Yeah.
10. S4: So erm sort of just involved in that = in that respect.
11. S5: Right.

In extract 4, from the first meeting between two IT companies, where S4's company is seeking to develop a relationship, the frame shift occurs in turn 6, where S4 clearly marks off the ensuing discourse as hypothetical ('So if someone calls up and asks...'). Such a frame shift also secures the speaker extended speaking rights to complete the hypothetical scenario (within which the HRS occurs) set up by the frame. Note that S5's 'okay' in turn 7 is a back-channel signal showing listenership, rather than an interruption or a turn in its own right. Such turn-passing back-channelling from listeners occurred frequently when speakers produced turns containing HRS, which were often quite long (see Extract 5 below). The shift out of the hypothetical scenario is signalled through the vague expression 'or whatever' (turn 8), and then, in turn 10, S4 provides an evaluative summary or "formulation" (Heritage and Watson 1979) (introduced with 'so') of the point illustrated through the hypothetical scenario.

The general sequential pattern then is:

Frame shift – HRS – Evaluative summary



with HRS forming the core of an evoked hypothetical scenario. A further general observation is that HRS is frequently used to exemplify, illustrate or elaborate on a point; in this case illustrating the kind of advice S4 provides clients. The pattern can also be more complex, for example the frame shift is not always immediately followed by HRS, as illustrated in Extract 5, where co-workers are discussing setting up a mentoring scheme for an employee:

#### Extract 5

1. S1: [...] She hasn't said that to me and I wonder whether she's = she sort of opens up more to+
2. S2: Well you see I would s= I would+
3. S1: +you
4. S2 +possibly suggest that if you set up some kind of mentoring scheme that you do that and I'll just talk to her each week and give her a hand. Cos if I'm [1 sec] er it's = You know she she knows that I was at university last year and she does. She says [1 sec] "Oh I need = I'm a bit stuck with this". So [1.5 secs] maybe just keep it like that. Cos I think you know sometimes it's difficult to admit if you're a bit stuck with something but it's easier if somebody just said "Oh did you have a good day yesterday? Oh I'll give you a hand with that if you want". So maybe if I [1.5 secs] keep out of that on a formal level and just keep going on an informal+
5. S3: Many thoughts?
6. S2: +level.

Here the frame shift to a hypothetical scenario at the beginning of turn 4 ('if you set up some kind of mentoring scheme ...') secures S2 quite an extended turn (which is uninterrupted, despite containing several longer pauses), during which she produces several instances of HRS which serve to illustrate how the proposed scheme would work. The first (introduced with 'she says') is an example of a borderline case between DRS and HRS, as it is not marked as

hypothetical. It may be that the person talked about *has* said this, but the speech report seems to function here as an example of a typical situation. The second speech report is clearly marked as hypothetical (and desirable) using one of the patterns identified: 'if somebody just said...'. The turn ends with an evaluative summary ('so maybe if I keep out of that on a formal level...'), thus completing the same basic pattern as in Extract 4, although the evoked scenario is more elaborate.

The role of the evaluative summary is worth highlighting, as it makes explicit the point illustrated through HRS, which can be particularly important in certain discursive situations, such procedural/directive contexts:

#### Extract 6

1. S1: So ... that way you can always have a machine ready to give to somebody+
2. S2: Hmm.
3. S1: +who suddenly turns up on the doorstep and says "Right. I've got a job here now and I'm working".
4. S2: U - uh.
5. S1: Yeah?
6. S2: Hmm.
7. S1: So ... so this= The suggestion of ... a generic procedure is very very good because it means we can kill two birds with one stone.
8. S2: Yeah.

In Extract 6, S1, a technical manager, is reviewing procedures with a subordinate, S2, who provides technical support for the department. S1 uses HRS to illustrate a procedure he is advocating (turn 3), and then provides an evaluative summary in turn 7 which makes the benefit of the procedure explicit with the idiom 'kill two birds with one stone'. It is noteworthy that idioms, as evaluative devices, were found to occur in a number of evaluative summaries of HRS (see Drew and Holt 1998). Idioms like this one often index

universal values and therefore lend weight to the claim, suggestion or assessment being made in the evaluative summary.

Unlike in Extract 5, the evaluative summary does not follow HRS immediately, but occurs several turns later. This means that S2 also had the opportunity to provide an evaluative summary; in fact S1 seems to try to prompt her to do this in turn 5 ('Yeah?'). Only after S2 has replied with a non-committal 'Hmm' (turn 6) does S1 provide the evaluative summary himself. Other examples of apparently attempting to elicit an evaluative summary were found in the extracts analysed, and in some instances the evaluative summary was indeed provided by the interlocutor. The HRS sequence thus also provides a 'slot' for eliciting alignment<sup>4</sup> from the addressee, which may be one reason why it is such a useful resource within business meetings.

#### 4.2.2 Functions of HRS

As demonstrated above, HRS sequences secure the speaker extended speaking rights as well as the opportunity to provide an upshot of the hypothetical scenario through an evaluative summary. The question is, therefore, what "discursive work" can the speaker use such a sequence for, in other words, what are the functions of HRS and of the HRS sequence?

Looking again at Extract 6, we see that the speaker (S1) uses the hypothetical scenario to highlight a problem and then propose a solution following the problem-solution pattern proposed by Hoey (1983, 1994):

problem – solution – evaluation

The procedure proposed by S1 in turns 1-3 provides the solution to a problem raised by S2 earlier in the conversation, with the problem reiterated in turn 3 and exemplified through HRS: *Somebody ... who suddenly turns up on the doorstep and says "Right. I've got a job here now and I'm working"*. In turn 7

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<sup>4</sup> Alignment, according to Du Bois (2007: 144) is defined as 'the act of calibrating the relationship between two stances, and by implication between two stancetakers'.

the solution is then evaluated positively using the metaphor 'kill two birds with one stone'.

HRS is often found throughout the data to raise problems or propose solutions, as in Extract 7, where it is used to do both:

#### Extract 7

S1: We decide what it does. [laughs] So basically my question'd be to you is what do you expect this product to do? What's reasonable use? [1.5 secs] Erm [1 sec] we have to [1.5 secs]

It's not good saying "Well it it might do that or it might not". We need to know. Problem

So effectively if you and me say [2 secs] "Well we don't know but we'll try it and er write the spec around what it can do" that's one way of looking at it. Solution

I mean that's not the the ideal way of doing it but it's valid. Evaluation

Here a supplier uses a problem-solution pattern to explain to a customer what information he needs from him to write a 'spec' (job specification) for a product the customer wants. The turn is constructed around the complete pattern (problem-solution-evaluation) and HRS is used both in signalling the problem and proposing a solution.

In the context of problem-solution patterns, as illustrated in the examples above, HRS is used to persuade the interlocutor of the benefits of a particular course of action. HRS also occurs frequently with a similar persuasive function within another rhetorical pattern:

Claim or Argument – Evidence

In this pattern, HRS is used to provide evidence for a claim or argument put forward earlier, as identified by Buttny (1997) for DRS in claim-evidence sequences in discussions of race.

In extract 5 above, S2 uses HRS to support her argument that she should provide informal support to the employee under discussion, rather than be involved in the formal mentoring scheme:

but it's easier if somebody just said "Oh did you have a good day yesterday? Oh I'll give you a hand with that if you want". So maybe if I [1.5 secs] keep out of that on a formal level and just keep going on an informal

Problem – solution patterns with HRS also occurred within larger claim – evidence patterns; for example, problem-solution sequences using HRS sometimes provided evidence for a claim. In some cases, the identification of such patterns necessitated the analysis of quite extensive stretches of discourse.

Extracts 5-7 illustrate the most widespread function of HRS, namely to put forward arguments and persuade interlocutors. Because the majority of instances of HRS occur in non-narrative contexts, typical narrative functions of HRS/DRS, such as animating an account or dramatization (Tannen 2007) are not prominent (though dramatization can play a role, as shown in extracts 8 and 9). As with Myers' (1999b) focus group study, rhetorical functions of HRS dominate in our data. But, whereas in Myers' focus group the persuasive strategies address the perceptions and opinions of the interlocutors, in our data they seek to influence actions.

The prominence of this function of HRS can be linked to the important role that decision-making and problem-solving play within the professional encounters in the corpus. Many of the company-internal meetings involve joint problem-solving, whereas external meetings (for example between suppliers and customers) often focus on promoting and negotiating products and services (Handford 2010); in both contexts, putting forward persuasive arguments in order to implement a desired course of action is key.

There are, however, a number of other examples of HRS in the data which also occur in non-narrative contexts, but do not seem to fit the rhetorical function of HRS, as described above. Extract 4 is a case in point; the core HRS sequence is reproduced here for convenience:

7. S4: So if someone calls up and asks for a particular solution I'll sort of draw down and say "Well why why are you actually going for that?" and+
8. S5: Okay.
9. S4: +erm "[company name] the place to be for that sort of system" or whatever.

This is the first time the companies have met, and S4 has requested the meeting. Producing the sequential pattern (frame shift – HRS – evaluation) affords him the opportunity to establish his credentials, with HRS playing a key role in exemplifying his professional activity. The function of HRS in this context, therefore, seems to involve a kind of professional identity display.

Another example of HRS being used to 'promote' the professional identity of the speaker also occurs in a 'new relationship' situation. Extract 8 shows an interaction between the manager of a sales division (S1) and his new senior accounts manager (S2), in which S2 develops quite an extended hypothetical narrative in which he frequently uses HRS:

#### Extract 8

1. S2: But erm ... the other thing I I th= I mean I love it when it gets to negotiation stage cos you know they wanna buy.
2. S1: Well =
3. S2: If they start to negotiate with you ... they want you.
4. S1: Absolutely.
5. S2: So it's a case of = And and what I tend to do as well is [clears throat] if it if it really comes down to it. Someone says "Look we really really really and Miles here's all the evidence in the world. Really wanna deal with [company name]. We want you to be our supplier ... but you're five K out ... and I can't justify it ... to my group F D". "Well shall we go

together and go and talk to your group F D?" "No". [1 sec] Erm and [1 sec] that's it. Is he just looking at the bottom line. Okay?

The speakers are discussing sales and negotiation techniques, and in turn 5, S2 describes how he would handle a negotiation situation which has come to an impasse – where the other party says that the price is too high. He does this by evoking a hypothetical situation through a frame shift that introduces HRS: 'what I tend to do ... someone says...'. In the ensuing interaction, which is dominated by S2, he develops this hypothetical scenario, frequently using HRS to play out an imagined dialogue between himself and the representatives of the suppliers. This hypothetical narrative builds up to a kind of climax (Extract 9) when S2 shows himself winning the argument with a clever response - 'you know what are you gonna do for me?' (turn 2) -, which is repeated for emphasis (turn 8).

#### Extract 9

1. S2: + the way I tend to do it is I tend to throw it back at them "Well fine. [1 sec]
2. We can probably do something ... erm but [2 sec] you know what are you gonna do for me? Because it is a two way street+
3. S1: U - huh.
4. S2: +I can't go back to my my manager and say ... I've given them a ten percent discount because+
5. S1: U - huh.
6. S2: +I felt like it".
7. S1: U - huh.
8. S2: "What are you actually gonna do to me?"

The hypothetical narrative is meant to illustrate S2's method (what he 'tends to' do) in dealing with difficult negotiations. As a new sales person in the company, this allows him to demonstrate his competence to his manager, as well as to feel the ground regarding the company's preferences in how they handle sales.

Unlike the rhetorical function of HRS found in problem-solution and claim-evidence patterns, the ‘identity’ function of HRS illustrated in extracts 4, 8 and 9, does not involve persuasion through logical argumentation. Nevertheless, it involves persuasion of a particular kind, namely persuading the interlocutor of the speaker’s professional competence and expertise. It thus fits the Aristotelian rhetorical category of ‘ethos’: “the speaker’s power of evincing a personal character which will make his speech credible” (McKeon 1941: 1318). What we have identified above as the rhetorical function of HRS actually involves just one type of persuasion: the classical rhetorical category of ‘logos’ - the “power of proving a truth...by means of persuasive argument” (ibid.).

Aristotle’s third rhetorical category, ‘pathos’, also proved useful in explicating a further non-narrative function of HRS found in the data surveyed. In some examples, HRS seemed to be used primarily for interpersonal reasons linked to the speaker’s communicative goal, such as performing a potentially face-threatening act off-record. While pathos - “stirring the emotions” (McKeon 1941: 1318) – may seem too strong a term to describe such uses of HRS within a business context, the examples in the data do involve an appeal to emotions and affect, rather than to logic, as illustrated in Extract 10. This involves an internal review of a (recently promoted) team leader, S2 (a Columbian Spanish speaker), by his manager, S1 (a native speaker of English).

#### Extract 10

1. S1: how's Magid getting on?  
[1 sec ]
2. S2: Er well ... really slow. I don't know why. I I just feel there's something he's ... he's no well [1 sec] The thing that he has to do is ... take too much time. I don't know if he's ... if he's /????/. Pressure too much to him or ... you know pushing too much to him or+
3. S1: Yeah.
4. S2: or =



5. S1: But it it could be =
6. S2: If I do so =
7. S1: Yeah.
8. S2: If I do so I say "No look we do this". And just ... in just ... one day.
9. S1: Yeah well that's that's part of it. I mean there could be a couple of reasons. W= One is cos he's not /?/.
10. S2: Okay.
11. S1: Well he's learning yeah?
12. S2: Well.
13. S1: One reason could be that he's not doing any work. ... And we don't know cos he's remote from here.
14. S2: Yeah.
15. S1: And and the third reason and probably the most likely reason is that ... you're thinking ... like any [1 sec] person who's managing would think "I could have done that in half a day. Why is it taking him two days to do?"
16. S2: U - uh. Hmm.
17. S1: But you know eve= you have to you just have to eventually ... you know you have to let the people [1 sec] Cos if you don't give 'em a chance. If you do it all yourself ... you just end up being really overworked.

Here S1 asks how one of the team members, Magid, is 'getting on', and in S2's response (turn 2), it is clear that he is not happy with Magid's performance. Both speakers use HRS; first S2 (turn 8) to illustrate the type of thing he says to the employee that might be putting too much pressure on him. Using HRS may also provide him the opportunity to demonstrate that what he is asking is reasonable. S1 replies by listing several possible reasons for Magid's poor performance (turns 9-15), with HRS being used for the third and 'probably the most likely reason' in turn 15. It is interesting that HRS is only used to put forward this final reason, whereas the other two reasons are listed in a straightforward manner using present continuous tense (e.g. turn 11: 'Well he's learning yeah?').

The question therefore is, why does S1 choose HRS in turn 15? The answer would seem to be that the 'reason' in this case is not something the employee, but the team leader (S2) is doing wrong. By expressing this indirectly via HRS (as something S2 is probably thinking), S1 avoids a potentially face-threatening criticism of his subordinate's relatively inexperienced management style. Moreover, he expresses his sympathy by adding that this is something any manager would do:

15. [...] you're thinking ... like any [1 sec] person who's managing would think "I could have done that in half a day. Why is it taking him two days to do?"

Here HRS fulfils the dual functions of distancing, by performing off-record criticism, and involvement (Tannen 2007), with the speaker adopting the addressee's point of view. The point being made through HRS is then made more explicit by S1 in turn 17, where he provides advice on how to handle the situation, which constitutes the evaluative summary, completing the HRS discourse pattern. Interestingly, this does not happen immediately after the HRS, but there is an intervening turn from S2, which presumably would have been an opportunity for him to show he has understood S1's point by providing an evaluation himself. It seems that it is only when this is not forthcoming, that S1 provides an explicit evaluation. Like Extract 6, discussed above, this example illustrates the important role played by the evaluative summary in relation to HRS and the interactive flexibility it offers, as it can be produced by any speaker.

The discursive work performed by HRS in all the examples surveyed involves some kind of persuasion and can be explicated according to the three classical rhetorical categories of logos, ethos and pathos. Speakers use HRS and HRS sequences to persuade their interlocutors a) to pursue particular courses of action through logical argumentation (logos), b) to convince them of their professional competence or some other aspect of their professional identity (ethos), or c) to influence them more indirectly on an interpersonal level by appealing to their emotions and affect (pathos). All the examples discussed above also show that the functions of HRS are

intrinsically linked to the professional context, transactional goals of the encounter and the genre being performed, whether it is decision-making and problem-solving, establishing one's credentials as a new employee or conducting a performance review. The study thus demonstrates how these classical rhetorical practices are constructed in contemporary business discourse.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A key question we have addressed in the paper is why speakers use HRS in business contexts. The analysed examples show, as in studies of DRS (Buttny 1997, Myers 1999a), that HRS allows speakers to achieve a sense either of detachment or involvement, and we argue that both of these can be persuasive in business contexts. Detachment is persuasive because it creates an objectifying distance between the speaker, the message and the listener, and hence may be particularly pertinent to business. Such a distancing function can be seen in extract 4, where HRS is used to provide evidence for the speaker's credentials. Notwithstanding this, positive involvement can be engendered through HRS: as with other forms of DRS the imagination is engaged more fully than by merely reporting of information (Tannen, 2007), thus enabling the message to be more persuasive. In extracts 8 and 9 we see involvement being created through the use of HRS at key dramatic moments of a hypothetical narrative. In summary, HRS in business meetings can therefore fulfil the parallel functions of detachment and involvement also found in other, non-professional contexts, and which were cited in section 2 of this paper. But this does not fully explain its frequency of use or functional versatility in business meetings.

When asking why speakers, usually senior employees in both intra-organisational and inter-organisational meetings, choose to use HRS instead of other forms, for example a narrative of an attested, relevant situation in the past, or an explanation of the desired outcome of the interaction, or indeed DRS from an attested situation, one possible reason is the potential

generalizability of the hypothetical frame. For instance, giving advice about procedures (as in extract 6), or suggesting the best way to train inexperienced staff (extract 10). In other words, whereas the applicability of a manager's utterance which refers to an actual instance may be questioned because it is no longer relevant, a hypothetical example is not open to the same criticism. Therefore, using a hypothetical frame allows the speaker to combine the detachment and involvement implicit in DRS with that of a generalizable and therefore relevant experience. The evaluative summary which rounds off the HRS sequence makes this generalizability quite explicit, as seen, for example, with the idiom 'kill two birds with one stone' in extract 6.

Similarly, in some situations, HRS may allow the manager to access knowledge or practices that he or she has not personally experienced, but deems relevant to the interaction. Were the manager required to use attested examples, then a lack of experience of the issue at hand would present an unattractive communicative dilemma: to either say nothing, or invent a response. The hypothetical frame, however, provides the opportunity for saying something relevant and potentially effective. In other words, managers can develop their point through reference to experience that may be part of the shared pool of business knowledge or practice, rather than their personal knowledge or actions.

While the above discussions of generalizability concern managers in a top-down power relationship, i.e. when interacting with subordinates, the generalizable nature of HRS can also be used strategically by those who have to negotiate power from a subordinate position. In extracts 8 and 9, we see the recently employed sales manager using HRS to express his usual approach to negotiation, thus demonstrating the relevance of his previous experience to this new workplace. This is a potential area of concern for his boss, the marketing director, because the sales manager is new to the IT industry, and much of this meeting focuses on how he can adapt to his new working environment. In sales, we might say that the ability to demonstrate performative competence is particularly crucial in order to persuade peers and managers of one's professional expertise, and HRS is one available means of doing this.

The above discussion has viewed power from the relatively static perspective of power-as-status, i.e. the view that people at work have more or less power than others because of the position they hold within or between institutions, but power differences can also be negotiated through discursive features like HRS. For instance, in extract 10, we see the more senior technical director advising the technical team leader through HRS. By explicitly empathising with the team leader's viewpoint through HRS (S1: ... you're thinking ... like any [1 sec] person who's managing would think "I could have done that in half a day. Why is it taking him two days to do?"), the technical director manages to lessen the power difference between the two, and hence creates a sense of collaborative convergence. This is despite the underlying criticism implied in the message. Such negotiation of power is also apparent in inter-organisational interactions where power is less institutionalised and therefore more dynamic, as in extract 4 where the visiting technical manager explains his role in the company to the host company through HRS. This is in response to the potentially face-threatening question about his role in his company – in essence he has to justify his right to be at the meeting, which he convergently achieves through HRS.

While issues like involvement, detachment and generalizability help explain the attraction of HRS, further reasons may account for its usage in a business context. An underlying cause, we argue, relates to change. Through the change in frame and the subsequent evaluation of HRS, the speaker may be intending or expecting a change in the listener's behaviour, knowledge or attitude; involvement, detachment, generalizability and convergence serve towards this purpose. Moreover, by eliciting an evaluative summary from the addressee in some instances (e.g. extract 6 and 10), speakers seem to seek evidence that the addressee aligns with this intended change. In all of the examples analysed here, some change in the stance, understanding or action seems to motivate the HRS utterance. For instance, in extract 10, the technical director wants the team leader to change the way he approaches managing the inexperienced Magid; in extract 7, the supplier clarifies the method for arriving at a job specification. In all these cases, the desired change is directed at concrete outcomes or actions. This also explains why all

the functions identified for HRS (logical argumentation, professional identity display and the interpersonal function) involve persuasion of some kind. Such an invocation of change seems particularly desirable in professional contexts involving management, where the examination of explicit experiences and sharing of advice can help build knowledge, change professional practices and thus create competitive advantage for the organisation (Nonaka, 1994).

In sum, we propose that what distinguishes the way HRS is used in a business context from its use in many other contexts is that it is employed, often by speakers in relative positions of power, to effect some change in action. By “change in action” we mean more than language as ‘social action’ in the traditional pragmatic, performative sense (e.g. Austin, 1962). For instance, Myers description of reported speech captures such traditional senses of performativity: “Reported speech always suggests a shift in frame, and that shift can focus attention on the setting, factuality, speaker’s position or the words themselves” (1999: 376). While the HRS examined in CANBEC does indeed suggest such shifts, it goes further in that it concerns actions in the physical world. We argue that this is because businesses are organizations that are constructed in the physical world and are maintained through actions in the physical world. This applies to IT companies as much as manufacturing companies.

To clarify this it is worth drawing on Popper (1979), who distinguishes between three worlds of experience: World 1, the world of physical states, objects and processes, which are observable; World 2, the world of private mental states, that of feelings, beliefs and intentions; and World 3, the world of objective contents of thought, including theoretical systems, the content of libraries, and languages. Whereas previous research on HRS has unearthed the impact that it can have on World 2, such as focus group discussions (Myers, 1999) or therapy sessions (Simmons and Le Couteur 2011), this research suggests that HRS can also be directed to impact World 1 in that it seeks changes to the way physical actions are performed (e.g. Extract 10) or ratification for the way actions are currently performed (Extract 8). While the interpersonal and identity functions analyzed above clearly relate to World 2, for instance persuading someone of your abilities (Extract 9), we argue that

speakers in these examples also seek to influence future actions, such as *meeting* the best clients or *receiving* more money, thus reflecting a more fundamental motivation in business with World 1 actions. In other words, we argue that such uses of language which perform a social action yet which, at a more intrinsic level, concern a future physical performance in the physical world are integral in business discourse and may distinguish it from some other discourses.

Finally, the efficacy of the approach developed and applied here can be evaluated. We argue that this study is evidence of the value of using corpus methods to identify recurrent patterns in spoken data, as a wide range of examples have been pinpointed thus addressing the first research question. While locating the variety of items prefacing HRS and what McCarthy (1998: 158) terms the “zero-quotative” demonstrates the recall limitations of typical concordance-based corpus approaches, the iterative approach employed here, including the close analysis of a complete meeting, meant that several of these items could be found and tested as patterns in the wider corpus. In addition, through applying tools from discourse analysis, we were able to identify the sequential pattern *frame shift – HRS – evaluative summary*, as well as rhetorical patterns such as *problem-solution*, which led us to discover the persuasive functions performed by HRS. Had the data not been examined within and across turns, but merely within turns and turn fragments, as is common in corpus analysis of concordance lines, such insights could not have been gained. Furthermore, the background information collected during and after recordings also facilitated more specific contextual insights than would otherwise have been the case. We therefore argue that corpus linguistics should move beyond the constraints of the concordance line, and develop appropriate methods which account for the contextual, sequential and social context when analysing interactional data from specialised spoken corpora.

This general overview of how HRS is used in spoken business discourse has also uncovered further areas for investigation. How HRS is used within different professional contexts and genres merits further investigation, and Koester’s (2014) study of HRS in negotiations is a first step

in this direction. Other areas for future research include links between form and function and different types of HRS (e.g. counter-factual, future-oriented etc.). The frequency and discursive force of HRS in workplace meetings demonstrated by this study indicates the value of future research across a range of professional and everyday contexts.

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#### **Transcription conventions:**

...      noticeable pause or break of less than 1 second within a turn

=          sound abruptly cut off, e.g. false start

+          speaker's turn breaks and continues after back channels or overlaps

/?/      inaudible utterances (one ? for each syllable)

[    ]      words in these brackets indicate non-linguistic information, e.g. pauses of 1 second or longer (the number of seconds is indicated), speakers' gestures or actions