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Forecasting the Weather

Everywhere you go, you always take the weather with you.
Crowded House ‘Weather with you’

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter described the spoken genre of race calling and placed it culturally in a context of ritual social action and individual social motivation. This chapter deals with a genre which is also formulaic but is written to be spoken, i.e. it is about the writing of scripts. The genre of the previous chapter was comparatively simple whereas its social context was comparatively complex. The written genre of weather forecasting, by contrast, is formally complex while socially it is comparatively simple. We listen to the weather forecast to find out what the weather is likely to be today or tomorrow. The forecasts are produced by professionals who have their own way of talking about weather to each other but have other ways of talking about the weather to us through the media. In the place of the confined context of race days and their minority of initiated racing aficionados, the scripts of this chapter were written for a whole nation of radio listeners and TV viewers. Its context is institutional since these forecasts are the work of a public body. The genre is also remarkable, in that, when this study was written, the scripts produced by the weather forecasters at the New Zealand Meteorological Office provided the sole source genre for all other weather forecasts broadcast in New Zealand. Since then, however, a number of different forecasters have provided services to media. Consequently the uniformity of the genre has changed. The Met. Office, too, has moved with
the times and provides tailor-made forecasts for individual presenters as part of its service.²

In the ‘classical’ period when forecasting was the sole preserve of the Met. Office, the New Zealand Meteorological Office forecast was broadcast through the National Radio Programme stations. In the wider study, of which this smaller one is a part, Hickey (1991) looks at the way the weather was forecast in New Zealand in 1990. Thirty-nine weather forecasts from a variety of radio and television stations were recorded. The period of time over which they were recorded allowed for some variation in the type of weather conditions presented in the forecasts, but was not long enough to include major seasonal changes. In addition to the broadcast forecasts, one forecast was taken from the Meteorological Service’s automatic telephone forecast for the Christchurch district. Five National Radio Programme broadcast forecasts from the Met. Office form the database from which the analysis below is drawn, although many more were listened to. This may seem a small sample. However, as indicated in chapter 1, large corpora usually yield little more than comparatively small corpora, given how stereotyped the formulaic genres such as weather forecasts are.

The Meteorological Office which produced the texts on which this analysis is based, is a state-funded organization set up to forecast the weather. Forecasts prepared by the Met. Office were, in 1990, either broadcast directly from the office or were repackaged by the media into a form styled for their viewers or listeners (Bell, 1991).

This is a study of a formulaic genre which is also an occupational register. Doctors have routines for interviewing patients (Coulthard & Ashby, 1975), defendants for pleas in mitigation before sentencing (Gruber, 2007). The genre to be examined in this chapter is so stereotypical that Goldberg, Driedger, & Kittredge (1995) show how a machine-based speech production system can produce weather forecasts while Mitkov (1991) provides a machine-based system for translating weather forecasts in a multilingual society.

3.2 Structural properties of Met. Office forecasts

In 1990, the National Radio network forecasts for the entire country were broadcast after the news bulletins at 5.30, 6.30, 7.30 and 8.30 am and 10 pm. The morning forecasts described the expected weather situation until midnight of the same day, while the evening forecast was until midnight of the next day. An extended-range forecast for the next five days was broadcast at 12.30 pm. In addition to these forecasts, short