Evaluating the Quality of Organization: Audits

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Since the 1980ies, audits have developed towards a fundamental tool in business life. Realized as a question-answer interaction, well-trained auditors evaluate the application and effectiveness of defined requirements. By now, there are several types of audits, among those the “quality audit” is supposed to be the most important one. If audits are driven by customers, their results qualify a supplying company for the contract – or they don’t. It can be assumed that there are conflicting goals at work: auditors try to identify the strengths and weaknesses on a content level, auditees want to gain a good evaluation. But what happens, if an auditee knows that he does not comply with defined procedures? Based on a real example of a quality audit this article shows what kind of communicative strategies are to be applied by both participants to realize their goals.

0. Introduction

Almost unnoticed by linguistic disciplines, a special type of dialogues known as “audit” has spread with increasing importance through the industrial groups in the last years. Audits can be described as dialogical, topic-structured question-answer-interactions which are carried out in order to evaluate the effectiveness of structure and organization in a company. Since audits first got instrumentalised in the context of quality management, I will concentrate on that kind of application.

Today audits are playing a greater role in negotiations between industrial companies. Through an audit a company can evaluate the organization of the supplier with regard to the features of quality procedures. Thus audits can provide important data about the quality abilities of a supplier. These data become part of the contract negotiations and can hinder or advance the realization of a contract.

As well, audits are realized as a routine institution in an increasing number of companies. In this context, participants communicate in order to verify if the audited person adheres to an established quality management system and whether the instructions of the quality management system are suitable.

In this article the interactive processes involved in the course of an audit dialogue are the centre of interest. It shall be demonstrated how the participants try to reach their goals in dialogical interaction. For an understanding of the communicative processes realized in an audit it is necessary to explain some fundamentals of audits in the context of quality management systems, before the communicative process of a real quality audit is analyzed.
1. “Audit”

The context of audits

A first look at that phenomenon named audit is focused on its etymological and historical roots.

With its origin in the USA, the term “audit” came into use more than 50 years ago connected with so-called “quality management systems”, i.e. systems of organization developed under the primacy of quality. The old idea of assessing quality merely by testing after production was replaced by an integral strategy to ensure quality implemented before production to meet the requirements of the customer. Managers as well as employees have to work under the principles, instructions and criteria of the quality management system. Thus, a quality management system regulates all technical and organizational procedures ranging from research and development, purchasing, planning, production and control, storage, packaging and delivery to drawing up contracts, sales and services. A lot of companies worldwide follow the principles of quality management. Sometimes they even apply more challenging concepts based on “total quality management” or “business excellence”. They all have in common that they force to document all the operations realized, thus ensuring sufficient verification.

In many countries, quality management systems are defined according to international standards laid down by ISO 9000 and ISO 9001. But these norms do not only provide the implementing of a quality management system. In many cases they are the basis for requirements a customer expects his supplier to meet. In order to verify if a supplier maintains an effective quality management system, customers often choose to conduct audits. In addition, companies carry out audits themselves in order to evaluate their own quality management system. The results of an audit often lead the management to make decisions which may have major consequences. A company’s success, therefore, depends more and more on the maturity of the quality management system.

At some markets, the existence of an effective and suitable quality management system helps to ensure a company’s existence. It is impossible, for example, for a company in the automotive industry to work with a supplier without a quality management system. Also in the electronic industry, where products are used for safety relevant applications (air traffic, power stations etc.), securing the final quality always demands that product specifications are met. As a consequence, the suppliers have to maintain a quality management system. Here audits are the most important instrument for verification and further development of the quality management system.

The concept of audits

On the whole, audits ensure the suitability and effectiveness of the quality management system. Because this is an important part of the company’s strategies, the results of an audit are of relevance for the company. There are three different types of audits:

1. Internal Audit. A company executes internal audits to verify its own quality management system. Each audit is conducted by one or two persons, the “auditors”, and by one or more persons being audited, here called “auditees”. In principle, every managerial group of a company could be audited as well as subordinate staff, whereas the position of an auditor mostly depends on a special qualification. ISO 9000ff. norms require that auditors are
independent from the tasks the auditees are responsible for. It is important to stress that an audit is not an examination of the persons being audited, or that its results have consequences for their salaries. Nevertheless, auditees often perceive audits as a form of an efficiency review. As will be shown later, this view can influence communicative processes in an audit.

In ISO 19011 we find a standard for planning, preparing, conducting, evaluating and documenting audits in the context of quality management systems. Meanwhile, you will find audits in a comparable function in the context of other kinds of management systems, e.g. environmental management systems. In consequence, the guidelines ISO 19011 support auditing processes in the context of quality and/or environmental management systems.

Based on a management plan and depending on the individual structure of the company’s organization audits are realized in several departments, managerial groups and so on in the course of a year. The audited persons are selected by a management representative for the quality management system. Selection criteria are responsibilities in the context of the company’s quality management system, but also poor results from audits performed before. The results of all audits are summarized up for an evaluation of the ‘quality of the quality management system’. This evaluation, based on the executed audits’ results can be described as a review of the quality management system by the company’s top management. Audits as well as reviews are crucial requirements of ISO 9001. Therefore, audits are an important and routine institution in quality managed companies.

The special procedures of preparing, executing and assessing internal audits differ from company to company. But the characteristics of audits described above are, in principle, valid for all companies maintaining quality management systems based on ISO 9001.

2. *External Audit.* A company (= customer) verifies the quality abilities of a potential supplier or of a company already supplying (= supplier) by means of an audit. If the results are negative, possible consequences could include the removal of the supplier from the list of qualified suppliers or the termination of contract. External audits are performed by the customer’s qualified personnel or by particular service companies, engaged by the customer. Compared with internal audits which need only one to three hours, external audits last one or two days, and in several cases even longer. Again results of all audits executed in relevant managerial groups or departments are condensed to an evaluation of the quality of the organization, to be viewed by the customer. Poor results of external audits can mean ‘hard times’ for an audited supplier into ruin, especially if he looses an important customer. So the importance of a suitable quality management system ensured by regular internal audits becomes evident.

3. *Certifying Audit.* A certifying audit is a special type of an external audit. If a company has established a quality management system based on ISO 9001, it can try to obtain a certification to this effect from an independent certifying company. This certifying company carries out extensive audits to verify the suitability and effectiveness of the quality management system.

All kinds of audits might be supported by consultants, if the internal capacities are not sufficient towards the requirements of planning, preparing or conducting audits (for a discussion of communication behaviour of consultants see Wolf 2000).
The course of an audit

Typically the audit procedure begins with a special invitation, sent to the auditee. It is possible that an audit checklist is sent, too. The auditee’s superior manager might also be informed. Usually the auditor visits the auditee at his working place to execute the audit.

The structure of audits is based on a series of questions and answers. In the course of the audit the participants deal with a series of previously announced topics. The persons involved carry out the audit as a succession of topics. A structure often is provided by an audit checklist which the auditor uses to ensure a standardized examination. In many companies a special audit checklist for each process of the quality management system has been worked out by the management representative for the quality management system (often called “quality manager”). He can take the role of the auditor, but another qualified person might function as an auditor as well.

All of the auditees utterances are documented. Often the audit checklist itself is used for recording the auditee’s answers. Based on this the auditor compiles a report of the audit which he sends to the management of the company. Mostly, the auditee has to sign the report. If he does not, the auditor will report his refusal.

The auditor evaluates the statements of the auditee concerning the quality management system. He has to control the audit in order to obtain the data necessary to evaluate the suitability and effectiveness of the quality management system. His questions and interpretations of the contents in the auditee’s answers are regulated by this goal.

On the other hand, the auditee is also driven by goals. Knowing that an audit is not an examination of his personal activities on the whole, he should be interested in an “objective result” of the audit. But he could have further goals. In attempting to get a good evaluation, an auditee may modalise his communicative moves which refer to the content level. For example, although in some cases he could give a simple and clear answer, he might, however, fear that his answer would result in an inappropriate evaluation for himself or for his company (if the auditor comes from a customer). As a result, the auditee tries to avoid a clear answer and maybe he lies.

Noticing or just expecting this, the auditor develops plans to work against such attempts of the auditee. Thus, his communicative moves are determined by superior goals of acting, too. The realization of the audit dialogue can be described as the participants’ attempts to construct their utterances with regard to those different and partially conflicting goals.

Based on this general outline of audits, an audit dialogue can be further described according to a content level and an evaluation level. The content level deals with those aspects of the dialogue which refer to the auditee’s activities as an employee within the company’s quality management system. The evaluation level addresses the question if the quality activities of the auditee, as revealed in the course of the audit, comply with quality standard requirements.

The auditor has to judge both levels. On the content level, the data contained in the auditee’s answers guide the auditor in his evaluation of the quality-oriented activities of the auditee. Thus the auditor has a certain monopoly on evaluation. The data, however, are supplied by the auditee. Only he has the information the auditor needs to do his job. Information withheld, wrong answers, hedges and the like hinder the auditor. It can be claimed that the auditee holds the monopoly of contents.

As a consequence, the audit participants have to coordinate their utterances to realize a successful audit in the eyes of both parties. These assumptions may be condensed in the
following hypothesis (A): Audits are characterized by communicative moves which are located at the content level but determined by the auditee’s goals to be located at the evaluation level.

Analysing a real audit I will try to prove this hypothesis. Before doing this the methodological basis has to be shaped.

2. The methodological basis

The analysis of audit dialogue which is presented here includes aspects from the following areas of theoretical research: semantics of communication, topic analysis and frame-based cognition theory.

Semantics of communication

The methodical procedure used to analyse the situation ‘audit’ results from semantics of communication. The German communication scientist Gerold Ungeheuer stresses that the point of an analysis of communicative situations is to reconstruct the internal actions, which the participants of a dialogue (here the participants of an audit dialogue) have realized for mutual understanding. The topical structures in a dialogue represent a legitimate basis for analysis. This is because:

“Es gehört zur alltäglichen Erfahrung, daß im Gespräch oder in monologischer Kommunikationssituation durch sprachliche Formulierungen nicht nur diejenigen Inhalte mitgeteilt werden können, die durch deskriptive Phrasen thematisch eingeführt sind, sondern bewußt oder unbewußt auch Inhalte, die über Motivationen des Sprechers und seine Stellung zur thematischen Mitteilung Aufschluß geben (...)” (Ungeheuer 1987a, 78).6

As a result of this the connection between communicative interaction at the ‘content level’ and the motivations of the audit participants at the ‘evaluation level’ can be deduced. Action-guiding strategies of the auditee are inferred from the utterances at the content level through the interpretative work of the auditor even if they are not made explicit. Whether his inference is correct or not: the auditor develops his guideline for the following utterances. Seen from the auditee the process is similar.

The intentions of the communications analyst7 are to reconstruct the interpretative works of the auditor and of the auditee. In a way he repeats the interpretations based on the recorded utterances. The communications analyst, however, remains an “externer Beobachter” (external observer; Roth 1978, 66f).

This interpretative reconstruction by the interactants as well as by the communications analyst is to be seen as a “doppelte Semantisierung” (double semantisation; Ungeheuer 1987a, 79):

“Es läßt sich also eine Formulierungsinterpretation von einer Selektionsinterpretation unterscheiden, wobei sich die erste positiv auf die angebotene Formulierung stützt, die zweite hingegen die Tatsache gerade der angebotenen Formulierung zum Ausgangspunkt der Inferenz macht” (Ungeheuer 1987a, 80).8

Nerlich summarizes Ungeheuer’s argumentation as following:

“In the first case the hearer’s interpretation is based on the normal, lexical contents of the utterance, in the second on the question: Why was this contents formulated in this or that way
and not in any other? The first kind of interpretation focuses on the semantic content, the second on the value of the utterance as an argument in the ongoing conversation” (Nerlich 1988, 385).

As a consequence the use of communicative tools itself as well as the non-use of paraphrastic alternatives can be the object of interpretation in the sense of semantics of communication.

**Topics**

As Bublitz shows a topic is a result of an attributing process: “Texte haben nicht Themen, sondern Texten werden Themen zugeordnet”. This attributing procedure is determined by “sprachliche, kontextuelle und situationelle Daten” (linguistic, contextual and situational data; Bublitz 1989, 180). In the course of a dialogue topics can be integrated into topical sequences. It must be considered, however, that an “objektive Gesprächphasierung” (objective sequencing of dialogue; Ungeheuer 1987b, 166) might be impossible.

‘Audit’ has been outlined as a coordinative process. Processes of topic initiation, topical change and sequencing are the instruments for coordination – always in view of their individual goals. So the interpretative works outlined before acquire an additional dimension by locating utterances (content interpretation) and the use of the specific formulations (selection interpretation) in the topical context.

**A frame-based concept**

The basis of the coordination is the available knowledge of the contents (with reference to the content level), the assessment of the current realization with regard to the prescribed activities (with reference to the evaluation level), as well as the situational procedures, which could drive those involved to modify their knowledge units.

The aim of communication for those involved in the audit “understanding through coordination of knowledge units” can be deduced. The internal actions included here are processes of planning, realization, interpretation and evaluation of utterances based on knowledge units. Thus, a connection is given to cognitive theory, which will be briefly explained.

Concepts of cognitive theory have been given a certain amount of attention in linguistic and communicative research in the last few years. In this context, the concept of “frame”, while primarily developed in AI research, has been often used. “Frames” are defined in this article as systematic cognitive data structures, specified according to certain criteria, which include evaluative and operational knowledge regarding content. Frames are embedded in the “individual theory of world” (individuelle Weltrtheorie; Ungeheuer 1987c, 308ff.). In other words frames are to be understood here as systematic and organized reference and relevance structures, which relate to the individual knowledge of the world as a part of individual theory of world. Frames fulfil their function for perceptive as well as for planning and realization processes and thus for speaking, listening and understanding. They are not, however, static entities and can be modified in the situational process or by other newly developed frames.

Communicative utterances in an audit can be described as a realization of frames which accordingly represent relevant knowledge units. The participants have to coordinate their knowledge by establishing and coordinating their frames. In a new perspective the term “negotiation” shall be used here: in an audit the participants have to negotiate their frames. In
other words, conclusions about the evaluative and operational knowledge of the speaker as regards to the content can be drawn from the utterances attributed to a topic. The auditor thus interprets the answers of the auditee as the latter’s expression of the available knowledge in relation to the topic being discussed. All answers of the auditee are reviewed on the basis of the auditor’s frames. The frames of the auditor, in relation to the demands of the quality management system are, however, not negotiable in the situation of the audit, in contrast to those of the auditee.

This configuration works as an integral part of the frame “AUDIT” of both participants, as is the knowledge of the other’s knowledge. If it is assumed that the individual being audited wants to be successful in the audit then we can make inferences concerning his strategies, which in turn determine his utterances. As outlined before, he might try to conceal the fact that he is not informed about the certain topic and this could be perceived as “non allowable gaps” in his frame, just as he may try to withhold information or even justify deliberate deviations from the instructions of the quality management system. If the auditor wants to do his job he has to employ his own strategies.

This leads to the second hypothesis (B) to be studied here: Forced to evaluate the quality management system concerning the suitability and effectiveness, the auditor tries to establish knowledge units at the content level by using his greater negotiation possibilities.

Now the methodological concept used here is shaped. The audit participants realize a dialogue based on different knowledge structures, here called frames. The utterances are interpreted with inference to the contents formulated and the use and non-use of formulations located in topical structures. These processes metaphorically are called a negotiation. Based on a real audit it has to be worked out how the negotiations between auditor and auditee are constituted if the hypotheses (A) and (B) are to be made plausible.

3. **Offering a contract: Course and analysis of a real audit**

The data are obtained in the context of so-called “internal audits”. As previously mentioned, internal audits are an important requirement of the standard ISO 9001. In this example a business unit, “research and development” (R & D), belonging to an important company in chemical industries, is audited by a quality manager belonging to this company. “R & D” acts as an independent company in the market for ecological analytics. Here, they offer their services. The procedures of reviewing and offering a contract are the main subject of the audit. In most companies it is not unusual to audit only a small part of the quality ruled processes. Because offering and reviewing contracts is an important element of quality management systems no other elements are audited.

All the procedures of reviewing and offering contracts must be organized on the principles of quality. This is a requirement of the ISO 9001. The basic consideration here is that a supplier of products must be able to guarantee that he really is in a position to supply, while making the offer or finalizing the contract. The norm ISO 9001 demands that: “The organization shall determine requirements specified by the customer, including the requirements for delivery and post-delivery activities” and a little bit later: “The organization shall review the requirements related to the product. This review shall be conducted prior to the organization’s commitment to supply a product to the customer (e.g. submission of tenders, acceptance of contracts or orders, acceptance of changes to contracts or orders) (…).” (ISO 9001, 24).
In order to meet these demands many firms are introducing a documentation which enables a satisfactory check of the offering process at a later date. Specific control tags are also developed. These must always be signed and dated after each stage has been completed by the person responsible for that. At the same time this documentation offers the possibility to examine at a later date whether the procedure for making an offer was actually adhered to.

The “R & D” business unit involved here introduced a procedure for drawing up offers and for reviewing contracts. This ensures that from the very beginning – according to the requirements of the norm – the quality of the products (or services) is assured. In the quality management system of “R & D” an instruction for drawing up offers and reviewing contracts is given. This particular instruction is the basis of the audit analysed here.

The auditor, a person with considerable experience in auditing, visited the auditee in his laboratory. The auditee is responsible for ecological analysis of water and is in charge of 32 scientists and laboratory technicians. He has never been involved in an audit before. The auditor was accompanied by a second auditor, who just took down the answers of the auditee. He did not speak during the entire dialogue. The audit took about 40 minutes. It took place on November 11th, 1991 and was recorded on tape recorder.

3.1 The topical course of the audit

The entire audit dialogue will be outlined before individual extracts from the dialogue are finally considered for more detailed analysis. The audit can be structured into seven topical dialogue sequences.

Beginning the audit, the auditor explains the purpose of the audit in general and immediately introduces the instruction of the quality management system for the drawing up offers and the reviewing contracts as the topic of the audit. The auditee is asked to describe each individual step from drawing up an offer to the final contract, using a project which had been completed shortly before as an example (Sequence I).

The auditor soon initiates Sequence II, which concerns the accompanying documentation to drawing up the offer (by a control tag). This sequence lasts about 15 minutes and is the major part of the audit dialogue. Special attention will be paid to this part in the following analysis.

After having finally ascertained that the auditee does not record the drawing up of the offer according to the quality management system, Sequence III takes as its topic the change of an offer by the customer at a later date.

The auditor, before trying to close the audit, focuses on the procedure after receipt of the customer’s order in Sequence IV. This attempt constitutes Sequence V and is relatively short. As a result of an utterance by the auditee the dialogue once again returns to an aspect of the control after having received the order (Sequence VI). The audit is finally closed up by the auditor (Sequence VII).

Two principal questions shall be studied here using individual sequences from the audit dialogue:

1. How is the coordination between the participants constituted at the content level? In terms of cognitive theory, how do they coordinate their frames?

2. Which strategic goals with regard to the evaluation level can be interpreted from the individual communicative moves?
3.2 The coordination of frames

As already mentioned the audit begins with a short introduction by the auditor (AT) in which he briefly explains the purpose and procedure of the audit.\(^\text{15}\)

\begin{center}
(I: 1) AT
\end{center}

Gut. Ähm jetzt aber nochmal das Thema ist die Richtlinie zur Angebotserstellung und es geht darum zu hinterfragen, ob diese Richtlinie, die letztes Jahr/ nein, die Anfang oder Mitte dieses Jahres verabschiedet wurde, ähm so angewandt wird und ob sie entsprechend auch wirksam ist.\(^\text{16}\)

The audited business unit (BU) starts reporting the procedure. After a short time the auditor (AT) initiates a new topical sequence:

\begin{center}
(II: 2) AT
\end{center}

Hm. (Nun) wird ja aus Sicht der Qualitätssicherung. ähm. hier erst äh dieser Ablauf greifbar, wenn Unterlagen erstellt worden sind. Das heißt alles, was vorher im Rahmen einer mündlichen Aushandlung betrieben wird, kann man nur annähernd nachvollziehen und kann es nur annähernd qualitätssichern. Aber ähm das/diese Angebotserstellung fängt dann an greifbar zu werden, wenn Unterlagen erstellt werden und das wäre, wie auch in diesem vorliegenden Fall, dann der Erstentwurf. Und w/wenn Sie dann mal beschreiben könnten, inwiefern das hier abgelaufen ist.\(^\text{17}\)

At this point AT for the first time initiates the topic of the documentation involved in drawing up the offer. The audited business unit manager (BU), however, does not describe the accompanying documentation in his answer. He understands AT’s very unclear question about “documents” as a question about the drawing up the offer. But it is clear from two elements of AT’s question that it is really about the documentation accompanying:

1. AT speaks of “verifying” a verbal negotiation. Here he really means the verification by documentation accompanying and this becomes clearer with his later utterances.

2. The fact that AT speaks of the drawing up the contract only taking form when documents are produced indicates that there must be other documents aside from the actual offer itself.

Later on, AT then asks more clearly:

\begin{center}
(II: 3) AT
\end{center}

Hm. Und äh wenn/ äh können Sie aus Ihrer Sicht noch mal schildern, ähm inwiefern hier interne Maßnahmen ergriffen worden sind, um das Angebot zu erstellen. Jetzt außerhalb der Erstellung des Textes und der Korrekturlesung äh durch den Geschäftsführer. Sind da noch andere Maßnahmen gewesen, die sinnvoll waren und auch erforderlich waren (und auch) durchgeführt wurden.\(^\text{18}\)

AT states his question more precisely by explicitly separating the “internal arrangements” from the drawing up the text. Peculiarly, in this move (3) the element “verifying” is missing in AT’s question. Instead the evaluation criteria “useful” emerges. Once again, however, BU does not answer as planned. Rather he describes the current procedure for writing offers as “internal arrangements”.

After a sequence about following the procedure when drawing up an offer, which AT ends with a short assessment of BU’s answer, AT finally succeeds in initiating the subject of the documentation accompanying, as the following moves (II:4 > II:5 > II:6 > II:7) show:
AT again uses the element “verifying” in (4) which had already been used in (2). BU now, for the first time, interprets AT’s question in the desired direction, and this is acknowledged by AT in (6). But BU has to admit to a deviation from the required procedure – though he only expresses his admittance in general terms (“are hardly used”). We will come back to this point.

It should be noticed here that AT only succeeded in bringing BU on the subject of the documentation accompanying drawing up an offer after repeated questioning. In frame-theoretical terms: the two elements “verifying” and “documents aside from the text of the offer” are, for AT, part of his frame “OFFERING”. The coordination of his frame – here performed by being insistent – with BU’s frame-content of “OFFERING” succeeds in (4) and (5), not in (2) or (3). Another element of the frame “OFFERING” is the use of accompanying documentation (realized by a control tag). The element “useful” from (3) arises again:

(AT: 17) AT

<…> Weil es ja auch sehr sinnvoll ist. Gut. Damit liegt dann auch ein entsprechende/ eine entsprechende Dokumentation vor, an der nachvollziehbar geklärt werden kann, wer an der Angebotsstellung auch beteiligt war. <…>22

Later on BU ratifies the assessment of the control tag as useful:

(BU: 18) BU

<…> weil ich’s eben für sehr sinnvoll erachte <…>23

The question “what’s in the frame?” – here: what’s in the frame “OFFERING” – can now be addressed: BU has learned that first the accompanying documentation has to be an element of the frame “OFFERING” and second that it is an useful one. AT has found that BU accepts the provided constitution of the frame. Thus the coordination of the frame is performed by pushing through the auditor’s constitution of the frame. Thereby a central hypothesis from Chapter 2 concerning the different negotiability of the auditor’s frames and the frames of the auditee is made plausible. As well this sequence tentatively supports the assertion made above that the participants in an audit, due to their different knowledge structures, have to coordinate their frames if the process of negotiation in the audit is to be successful.
3.3 Strategical use of topical structures

Based on the content interpretation and the selection interpretation by Ungeheuer (see Chapter 2) it shall be demonstrated how the auditee tries to avoid an unfavourable evaluation by trying to establish non-dangerous topics.

It has already been pointed out that BU in (7) expresses the non-use of the control tag only in general terms. In this way he initially avoids making a statement about his personal procedural methods. AT, however, immediately asks again:

(II: 8) AT


(II: 9) BU

Hm es wäre sinnvoll, wenn man genügend Zeit dazu hätte, solche Sachen einzuhalten, aber meistens ist man ja ohnehin einem sehr starken Termindruck <…> 25

BU attempts to justify his behaviour by introducing the element “time pressure” for which he, of course, cannot be held responsible. What is noticeable is the appearance of the element “sinnvoll” (useful), which had already been used by the auditor in (3). It can be assumed that BU at this moment realized what AT wanted. With his reaction to (3), in which the auditee talked about the procedure of offers, he might have been trying to avoid the unpleasant subject of accompanying documentation. It could then be implied that with this strategy BU tried to avoid the negotiation on the content level by following his goals on the evaluation level. This hypothesis, however, cannot be sufficiently verified on the basis of the material here. 26

AT picks out as his topic BU’s argument about “time pressure” by asking:

(II: 10) AT

Was ähm würde denn an/ Sie sagten an bürokratischem Aufwand ähm/ würde denn da zusätzlich entstehen, wenn man sich an den Laufzettel oder Arbeitszettel, wie auch immer, halten würde. 27

(II: 11) BU

Äh ja gut äh/ also ich könnte als/ in meiner Funktion als Ersteller einer solchen Unterlage schon noch damit äh/ damit leben. Aber es is ja nich nur der Ersteller, der eine solche Unterlage pflegen muß <…> sondern es is (eine) entsprechende Geschäftsführung, die das gegenüberzeichnen hat und vielleicht funktioniert das auf der Seite ja nich un/ un/ unmittelbar. 28

BU thus fails with his first strategy “time pressure” and immediately suggests a new way: the managing director does not adhere to these tags. Once again BU is not responsible for not adhering to the procedure. He indicates that he would use the tag if it were worthwhile. With this manoeuvre he introduces the managing director as a new person into the dialogue. It is known in the business unit that this person sometimes negates fixed structures.

But AT also allows this attempt to fail. He does not go into the subject “managing director” at all, but attacks BU:
(II: 12) AT
Ähm darf ich einfach mal überspitzt formulieren: Sie haben einen Arbeitszettel oder Laufzettel noch nie gesehen?  

(II: 13) BU
Doch, ich kann einen, aber im Rahmen der/ doch doch sicher, nee/ also im Rahmen der Angebotsformulierung äh kann ich keinen.

With (12) AT ends several attempts of evasion. BU tries to modify his unavoidable admission for the last time (“Yes, I know one”) before finally agreeing to AT.

On the whole BU tries to avoid the fact of his admission several times, by introducing other topical aspects. The topics in his three attempts are:
1. generalisation of the problem, in (7)
2. time pressure, in (9)
3. managing director, in (11).

AT, however, successfully responds to each attempt:

- to 1. he focuses on the person BU, in (8)
- to 2. he puts the general statement in more concrete terms, in (10)
- to 3. he makes an abrupt, brusque assumption, in (12).

Applying the frame concept, BU does not succeed in addressing AT’s knowledge units, which could lead AT to follow up on the topical aspects BU desires. AT refuses to accept the initiation of the topics.

At this point in the audit dialogue, AT has achieved two important results:

a) He has succeeded in establishing his frame “OFFERING”, as BU finally ratifies the topic of the documentation accompanying (in (2) to (6)).

b) He forces BU to make an unambiguous statement at the content level. BU concedes that he has never seen a control tag to document drawing up an offer. AT succeeds in doing this by not accepting the topics initiated by BU at the content level (in (7) to (13)).

AT could now make an explicit, assessed statement and thereby introduce a negotiation at the evaluation level, because BU has admitted not following an important aspect of the quality management system. But AT adopts another path which leads to a surprising turn in the negotiation.

(II: 14) AT
Gut, dann (müßt’) man der Frage nachgehen, ob der generell nicht verwendet wird bei der Angebotserstellung, und Sie den deswegen nich gesehen haben, oder ähm … ja welche Möglichkeit könnt es noch geben … daß der für Sie nicht sichtbar mitgeliefert wurde, um sagen wir mal diesen Formalismus gegenzuzeichnen.

AT here raises the question why the control tag is not used. He could have embarrassed BU with other questions (e.g. “Why don’t you use the tag?”), or he could have made an explicitly negative judgement (e.g. “That’s unacceptable behaviour!”). Instead, AT begins his consider-
ations with “gut” (= well) and thereby closes the negotiating sequence at the content level (is the control tag used?) and at the evaluation level (does BU comply with the requirements?). By using ‘well’ (instead of, for example, “That’s bad”) BU avoids a possible unfavourable assessment. AT gives BU a chance to “save face” by considering that maybe the tag is not even given to BU. AT finally pursues the same track which BU once tried and which can be described as “BU is not responsible”.

BU takes up this aspect immediately:

(I1: 15) BU
(Und) irgendwann muß ja an mich mal der Antrag gestellt werden, daß ich ‘n Angebot formulieren . soll. <<AT: Ja>> Ja und da könnte man dann erwarten, wenn sowas gemacht wird, daß mir so’n Begleitzettel , dazugegeben (wir)/ wird. <...> Das ist nicht der Fall. Das/ (da)/ deswegen geh ich davon aus/33

At this point BU, who now is explicitly following the strategy of shifting the burden of responsibility to others, is interrupted by AT:

(I1: 16) AT

Hm jetzt muß ich aber mal folgendes sagen. Ich hab nämlich vorhin ein Audit durchgeführt<...> wo mir ein Arbeitszettel vorgelegt wurde, wo gerade dieses üh Projekt üh durch einen Arbeitszettel begleitet wurde. Und sogar durch Sie unterschrieben wurde.34

BU is totally surprised and asks to see the tag. This is presented, confirming AT’s statement.

The whole course of the dialogue seems to have been turned upside down. Not only does AT once again refuse to accept the strategy “BU is not responsible”, which he himself had initiated with (14), he also knew from the very beginning of the audit that BU had at least once signed such a tag. So why did he realise the attack in (12)? This question can only be answered if we assume AT negotiated strategically, too.

4. Goals and strategies of the auditor

It has been postulated above that both the auditor and the auditee pursue strategies at the evaluation level which determine the negotiation process at the content level. This could be proven in the case of BU. With reference to AT the hypothesis should be put forward that:

– in the audit his primary goal was to achieve agreement with BU about the importance and value of the control tag. AT even took BU’s own use of the control tag to support his arguments.

– on the basis of this primary goal at the level of particular topical sequences, he employed apparently contradictory communicative moves in order to bring BU to an agreement.

The further course of the dialogue must be studied in order to verify this.

After AT has succeeded in establishing the control tag as the topic in Sequence II, this instrument of documentation is constantly referred to in the remaining sequences. AT refers to the tag when clarifying the processes during the negotiations with customers (Sequence III) as well as at the stage when the order is received (Sequence IV).
AT’s summary at the end also proves that the control tag is the most important topic of the audit for him:

(VII: 19) AT

Gut. So. Damit bin ich eigentlich bezüglich der Abläufe durch. Sie haben ähm . . den Laufzettel äh mitgeschildert, auch von der Bearbeitung her, wir haben ja auch nachvollziehen können, daß Sie den benutzen und auch benutzt haben und ich sag einfach mal zusammenfassend <…>35

In the summing up of the entire dialogue AT emphasizes the control tag and its usage by BU. He does not go into BU’s deviation strategies (in (7), (9), (11), (15)) but rather selects as his topic the fact that BU uses the control tag. When in (19) not only a summary to end the situation but also an explication of AT’s primary strategic goals can be identified then for the entire dialogue the following general description can be offered:

G 1 = the documentation accompanying is an important part of drawing up an offer
G 2 = the control tag is a useful instrument
G 3 = BU uses the control tag.

G 1 to G 3, formulated here as statements, are, in fact, AT’s strategic goals, which he already established before going into the audit – even if only implicitly. By taking advantage of the possibilities available to him of directing the dialogue and the topics, AT succeeds in accomplishing all three goals.

He finally achieves G 1 by BU’s statement in (7), which was also ratified by BU in (18) at the evaluation level. With this G 2 also is achieved.

AT, however, had to reject two attempts by BU which, had they succeeded, would possibly have prevented G 2 from being achieved. To do this AT employed his communicative move (12: “…never seen a control tag…”), by which he finally managed to get a clear statement by BU. AT recognized this move although he knew that BU had used a control tag before (uttered in (16)). This contradiction has to be clarified now.

The hypothesis can be proposed that AT’s utterance in (12) to the fact that BU had never seen a control tag is to be seen as a metaphor. AT wishes to express that BU had never ‘consciously’ seen the control tag.

This hypothesis cannot be verified satisfactorily from the dialogue. Therefore, an interview was conducted with AT four weeks after the audit. AT confirmed the interpretation of his utterance in (12) as metaphorical.

On the question of the contradiction between his two communicative moves (12) and (16) he replied:

(Interview: 20) AT

Ich wollte eigentlich die Sachaussage herauskristallisieren, daß er diesen Zettel unbewußt unterschrieben hat/ er ihn nämlich gar nicht beachtet hat. <…> Also nutzt er ihn unwissentlich. Für andere bedeutet der Zettel einen hohen Informationsgehalt. <…>36

AT gives a metaphorical meaning to the phrase “never seen it before” by connotating attributes such as ‘unconsciously’ and ‘unknowingly’.
The contradiction between (12) and (16) can, therefore, be taken as clarified. At the same time it becomes clear that AT had pursued the realization of G 3 with his communicative move in (12). AT finally achieves G 3 in his summing up of the dialogue.

5. Conclusion

The audit analysed here helps to verify the hypotheses (A) and (B) presented in Chapters 1 and 2. The basic aspects shall be summarized.

Hypothesis (A)

The auditor’s evaluation of the auditee’s answers is an action-guiding determinant for the auditee. It could be shown that the auditee’s communicative moves are governed by his attempts to obtain a good evaluation. By trying to limit possible clearness or attempting to initiate topical aspects, the auditee wants to avoid a simple and clear answer which could bring an unfavourable result. But, as it was shown, he didn’t succeed (see Chapter 3.3) mainly because the auditor is in a better position to establish or reject topics. In fact, the previously claimed evaluation level seems to determine the coordination process located at the content level. The analysis demonstrates that the negotiation processes at the content level are driven by the auditee’s strategic plans which are deduced from the evaluation level. It is of no importance whether his worry is justified or not. The auditee acts with regard to his goals at the evaluation level. So hypothesis (A), as it was claimed in Chapter 1, is made plausible.

Hypothesis (B)

All attempts of the auditee to deviate are refused by the auditor. As shown in Chapter 4 he is able to use greater negotiation possibilities. He establishes his frame “OFFERING” including the control tag as “useful”. The strategies employed by the auditee are blocked as outlined before. From the beginning the auditor is prepared to check the accuracy of communicative moves, and, if necessary, to refuse or to accept them. It can be assumed that in most cases an auditor will come out as the winner in this game. In the audit examined here the auditor establishes his knowledge units and succeeds in influencing the concepts of the auditee.

In summary an audit can be described as a specific negotiation process, in which a coordination of frames works to achieve primary goals. The question-answer-interaction in an audit acquires its particular character by means of the pre-structured negotiation between the participants. Audits are to be perceived as a type of dialogue which requires further consideration.

Notes

1 I thank H. Walter Schmitz for helpful comments.
2 The term is not to be confused with the financial inspections performed by internal revenue services and the like. Here, the term “audit” is to be understood as “quality audit”. The international standard ISO 9000 contains the vocabulary of all quality standards. Audit is defined there as a “systematic, independent and documented process (...) for obtaining audit evidence (...) and evaluating it objectively to determine the extent to which audit criteria (...) are fulfilled.” (ISO 9000, 31). The German versions of the international norms (the “DIN EN ISO”) which are used in this article are identical with the international one (“ISO”= International Organization for
Standardization; “EN” = EURO-Norm). The German “DIN” contains the English ISO-text (“DIN”= Deutsches Institut für Normung e.V.= German Institute for Standardization). A special type of audit is the “communication audit”, which is realized in order to improve a company’s internal communication management (see Wolf, in prep.).

In ISO 9000 “quality management” is defined as “… coordinated activities to direct and control an organization (…) with regard to quality (…)”. (ISO 9000, 21). The same standard defines quality as “degree to which a set of inherent characteristics (…) fulfills requirements” (ISO 9000, 18).

The norm ISO 9000 defines “management system” as a “system (3.2.1) to establish policy and objectives and to achieve those objectives (…)”. (ISO 9000, 21). A “quality management system” is defined as a “management system (…) to direct and control an organization (…) with regard to quality” (ISO 9000, 20).

The term “move” is taken from Goffman (1981). He defines move as “… any full stretch of talk or of its substitutes which has a distinctive unitary bearing on some set or other of the circumstances in which participants find themselves (some ‘game’ or other in the peculiar sense employed by Wittgenstein), such as a communication system, ritual constraints (…) or whatever”. But he considers “move” as a term, “… whose definition I cannot and want not to fix very closely” (Goffman 1981, 24). A move must not be identical with a turn.

It is part of everyday experience that in dialogue or in the monological communicative situation not only are those contents communicated which are introduced by descriptive phrases, but consciously or unconsciously also contents which provide information about the motivations of the speaker and his attitude towards the topical communication (…). – All quotations are translated by G. Wolf.

Here it should be allowed to introduce myself as a consultant who often has to work as an auditor in the context of external audits as well as internal audits. In this respect, I am a “communications analyst” (or something like that) with experience as a participant in the field I describe.

Thus a contents interpretation can be distinguished from a selection interpretation. The first is based on the offered utterances; the second, however, uses the choice of the utterance offered as the basis of inference.

Texts don’t have topics, topics are assigned to texts. – It is not the place to discuss the different concepts concerning “topic” or “topic-comment”. Bublitz gives some orientation in this area of research.

“(…) understanding involves general concepts, categories, rules and strategies. This general “knowledge” is not amorphous but organized in conceptual systems.” (van Dijk 1977a, 214). And elsewhere, van Dijk shows that “discourse processing at various levels depends on our conventional knowledge of the world, as it is represented in structures called frames. (…)” (van Dijk 1977b, 18). Kallmeyer outlines that participants embed their utterances in structures, which are used as an assumption for expectations and interpretations (Kallmeyer 1981, 91f.).

"Frames are knowledge representations about the ‘world’ which enable us to perform such basic cognitive acts as perception, action, and language comprehension. At some higher level the content of a frame is fixed, but its lower level terminals can be accommodated to the properties of information input.” (van Dijk 1977b, 19). The definition of the term “frame” by Minsky (1975) was of great influence for AI-research. A discussion of the various frame concepts is to be found in Tannen (1979). For an application of a frame-based dialogue analysis see Wolf (1989).

König defines strategies as goal-oriented plans of action in decisive situations, which lead the participants to an organization of their acting. Communicative strategies include assumptions about possible or probable reactions of the partner (König 1989, 478). Also see van Dijk/Kintsch (1983).

"Product” can be a material or an immaterial good. Thus, services are included, too.

I myself was not involved in the analysed situation, neither as auditor nor second auditor nor auditee.

The following symbols are used in transcription: “(II:1) AT” = move 1 used in this article, realized by AT in Sequence II; “> (II:5)” = the move II:5 follows immediately in the real course of the audit dialogue; “.” = 1 second silence; “/?” = hesitation or interruption; “(word)” = the word was not exactly identified; “<…>” = utterances left out; “<yes>” = utterance of the hearer without getting the turn. A translation of the German communication is to be found in notes.

Well, uh but now the subject is again the instruction for working out offers and we have to ask if this instruction, which passed last year/ no, at the beginning or the middle of this year , uh is being so applied and if it is also accordingly effective.

Hm. (Now) from the view of quality assurance . uh . a procedure here takes form when documents have been produced. That means that everything which was done in verbal negotiation before, can only be verified approximately and quality can only be approximately assured. But uhm the/the drawing up of an offer really
begins to take shape when documents are produced and that would be as in this case, then the first draft. And if you could then describe to which extent this occurred here.

18. Hm. And uh now if/uh could you describe again from your view uhm in which manner internal steps were taken in drawing up the offer. Now beyond drawing up the text and the reading of the proofs by the managing director. Were there other arrangements which were useful and necessary (and which also) were carried out.

19. Yes, very nice. This ping-pong-effect between the person who draws up the offer and the managing director and possibly the office, too, who write such offers, is this verified in some way, can this be verified, or is it more a verbal arrangement? – The element “verbal arrangement” of move (4) is very similar to the element “verbal negotiation” in move (2). This could support the argumentation that AT tried already to initiate the accompanying documentation in move (2). Further proof that AT tried to trigger the accompanying documentation in (2) is to be found in AT’s conclusion of the whole audit dialogue (see VII: 19).

20. (III: 5) BU: Verifying would somehow have to involve document documentation. (III: 6) AT: Yes. (III: 7) BU: There are control tags uh which, I must admit uh while drawing up an offer are hardly used.

21. To avoid misunderstandings: “OFFERING” is used to characterise a frame with content and operational knowledge concerning the special processes connected with drawing up and reviewing contracts.

22. <<...>> Because it is very useful. Well. Thus adequate/adequate documentation exists, by which can be verifiably clarified who also contributed to the drawing up the offer. <<...>>

23. <<...>> because I consider it to be very useful <<...>>

24. Are not used by you. <<BU: No>> Do I understand that correctly. And why do you think, uh y/ hm it doesn’t need to be observed?

25. Hm, it would be useful if one had enough time to use such things, but one is usually under great time pressure anyway <<...>>

26. It was not possible to interview BU which would have given the opportunity to verify this hypothesis.

27. How much uhm/you said extra red tape would arise, if you stuck to the docket or the control tag, whichever.

28. Uh, well, uh/now I could as/in my position, as the one who issues it, I could live with uh/live with it. But the one who issues it is not the only one who has to deal with such a document <<...>> but also a corresponding managing director who has to countersign it and perhaps it doesn’t work on this side t/t/ right away.

29. Uhm, can I simply be somewhat blunt and remark that you have never seen a docket or control tag?

30. Yes, I know about one, but within the context of/yes certainly/but well in the context of formulating an offer . uh, I don’t know about any.

31. The terms “initiant” and “acceptant” are worked out by Ungeheuer (see Ungeheuer 1987c, 162f. and Ungeheuer 1987d, 42).

32. Well, then the question (must) be followed up as to whether it is generally not used when drawing up an offer, and therefore you didn’t see it or uhm … yes what other possibility could there be … why it was not clearly presented to you, let’s say, so that you could countersign this formalism.

33. (And) at some point the request must be made to me that I am supposed to draw up ‘n offer. <<AT: Yes>> Yes, and then one could expect, if that’s the case that I (wi)/will be given such a control tag. <<...>> That’s not the case. That/ (th)/that’s why I assume/

34. Hm but now I have to say something here. I have just carried out an audit <<...>> where I was given a control tag, where this very uh project uh was accompanied by a control tag. And it was even signed by you.

35. Well. So. With that I’ve really gone through all the procedures involved. You’ve uhm.. described uh the control tag and its processing, we’ve been able to reconstruct that you use it and have used it and so I’ll say <<...>>

36. I really wanted the factual statement to be crystallized that he had unconsciously signed the tag / he had not noticed it. <<...>> He uses it unknowingly. For others the tag contains a lot of information. <<...>>

References