

# Genre and Engagement

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In this essay, I would like to explore a little further genre and its place in the world. Such a statement is possibly presumptuous in an issue dedicated to exploring « New Horizons in Stylistics ». For one thing, it presumes that genre analysis has already established itself as one way of going about the business of capturing stylistic variation. It also presumes that genres do, indeed, have their place in the management of human affairs ; that in Martin's well-known dictum, « Genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them » (1985, p. 250). While I think both claims are by now solidly established, they also suggest that if stylistics — as traditionally conceived — wishes a greater rapprochement with the burgeoning work on genre then it may need to expand its interests (and methodologies) to incorporate more social and contextual features. And I dare say comparable considerations already apply to literary texts as well, at least as illustrated by Levinson's stunning study of « The Romantic Fragment Poem », wherein she is able to show that the historical and cultural conditions of two hundred years ago led to the projection of the accidental and occasional as an integral feature of a semi-consciously produced genre (Levinson: 1986). In the light of all the foregoing, I would like to consider more specifically the following issues:

1) Where and how might genres engage with social life and social and institutional structures ? In other words, how should we conceptualize genres in relation to what Halliday, Hasan and others call « contexts of culture » ?

2) What is there to gain (if anything) in considering genres not as individual and distinctive types of texts, but rather as sets or systems ?

3) How, following Bakhtin, can we recover society's engagement with genre characteristics for verbal play (pastiche, parody, debunking and amusement) and its engagement with genre characteristics for experiment, realignment and shock ?

4) And, finally, to what extent do these explorations cause me to reconsider the close relationships I have been proposing between genre and discourse community ?

But first a little clearing of the air. Even the most casual observer of the contemporary American verbal scene cannot but be struck by the proliferation of the word « genre » itself in much of society. What used to be a term confined to the more erudite reaches of humanistic scholarship and criticism and to the conversations of the literati has expanded into the media and is no longer such a marked term in ordinary discussion. It has become quite widely used for a whole range of artifacts, physical, artistic, organizational and communicative: for instance, I have recently heard it used to describe types of elevators, food dishes, television shows, films and meetings.

Concomitantly, in the academic world the range of communicative events countable as genres has been steadily expanded. Apart from a few exceptions such as Jay Lemke's *Talking Science* (1989), more and more analysts have followed Ventola, Hasan and others and are comfortable with the thought of genre applying to spoken dialogue encounters as well as to prepared monologues and written texts. Nor do I think there are many traces remaining of those assumptions, natural enough in literary history and criticism and in rhetoric, that genre should somehow be restricted to prestigious, important and cultivated exemplars. If ever the history of genre studies is written, I expect it will show in this regard the decisive influence of Carolyn Miller's 1984 article on « Genre as Social Action »:

To consider as potential genres such homely discourse as the letter of recommendation, the user manual, the progress report, the ransom note, the lecture, and the white paper, as well as the eulogy, the apology, the inaugural, the public proceeding, and the sermon, is not to trivialize the study of genres; it is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves (1984, p. 155).

I think that there is also pretty wide agreement that genres are abstractions, even though the terms by means of which this abstract status is captured vary widely: typification (Bazerman: 1992); virtual existence (Miller: 1992); immanence (Ongstad: 1992); and potentiality (Halliday and Hasan: 1989). As a result, for most commentators to identify a genre with a discursive instance is at best a rough shorthand. And if not, it is seen as a Gilbert Ryle category mistake: « O.K., I have seen all the troops and guns and regiments and divisions, but where's the army? » — « O.K., I have seen all the texts, but where is the genre? »

It is somewhere around here that consensus begins to fracture. One issue is the area of genre-boundaries: how large or how small should they be drawn? And what kind of criteria should be used to determine whether texts A and B are or are not instances of the same genre: recurrence of rhetorical situation (Miller: 1984, Yates and Orlikowski: 1992); consistency of communicative purpose (Swales: 1990); existence and arrangement of obligatory structural elements (Halliday and Hasan: 1989)? Nor is it even clear (at least to me) to what extent the categorization of genres is open to agreement on the basis of empirical investigation. One of the most interesting attempts to operationalize criteria is Ruquaiya Hasan's tantalizingly short discussion of teachability:

One need not know all the details of a particular situation in order to be able to say what the overall structure of the message form would be. You can teach someone how to write, say, an application, without knowing who the applicant is, or who the grantor, or what specifically the applicant is applying for and what justifications are being put forward for granting the application. But if that is the case, then it would be quite wrong to claim that the genre is different depending on whether the application is, say, for leave of absence, or for travel assistance (1989, p. 105).

I remain fascinated by this suggestion but uncertain too. What is it that we might be teaching here that is stripped of, or at least separated from, topic- and

context-sensitivity and devoid of audience analysis ? Or are we in Widdowson's words dealing with « a general routine *abstracted* from particular frames of reference » (1983, p. 102) ? Even if the teaching is not so disjunctive, but of a theme and variation type, then how do we measure « how to write » ? Meeting the genre expectations, or being communicably effective ? And yet for all my equivocations I see the potential. I might indeed see the case of leave and travel assistance applications as being co-teachable (a comfort to one who spends a lot of time helping non-native speaker graduate students write abstracts, research papers and the like), while my reading about other applications such as those for patents (Bazerman: 1992) would suggest that this class of text would not be subsumable within the « how to write applications » unit.

A second issue which *I know* to be contentious is the relationship between register and genre (Bex: 1992). I hold to the view that the current debate about the value and conceptual place of register vis-a-vis genre is as much as anything determined by the development of our field over the last thirty years. If I am on record as saying that register is self-evidently a key element in an early lexicogrammatic tradition of variety characterization and genre a key-element in later work on situated discourse (Swales: 1990, pp. 40-41), then let me also say that the relative status of the two may shift yet again as the corpus-based work pioneered by Biber and Sinclair offers us a different kind of wider perspective on language variation. And in addition to history there is also ideology. Indeed, I take the current disagreement between Martin (genre above register) and Kress (register above genre) to be at least partly about Martin's interest in macrostructure as opposed to Kress's fear of insidious authoritarianism in any hierarchical scheme, as well as about Martin's willingness to accept stylistic variation within a genre and Kress' wish to capture the full range of determinants operating on a single case. Although, of course, both share, as many others do both in Australia and elsewhere, a vision of genre as empowering and emancipating. Nothing seems more striking about this work to outsiders than the way in which a traditionally conservative concept like genre has become an instrument of radical ideology and methodology.

The final of my preliminary topics is perhaps the most controversial. To what extent, or better, under what circumstances, should genre analysis be restricted to the textual characteristics of the genre-exemplars ? And when and where should it be concerned with other documentation, with social history, institutional rationalization, interview, experiment, reader-response, ethnography and the like ? When should we be like archaeologists examining the pots and sherds of some otherwise-unknowable vanished culture and when should we be anthropologists ? It seems to me that systemic linguists often claim to be anthropologists but actually typically operate as archaeologists. Systemic work such as Halliday (1978) and Halliday and Hasan (1989) gives much attention to such factors as the context of situation and the context of culture. The back-cover to the 1989 volume closes with:

the analysis of texts reveals how... the way a text is organized, and the kinds of coherence that it displays, relate closely to the place, and the value, that it has in its social and cultural environment.

However, we rarely find much of this social and cultural environment actually worked into the analysis as part of the explanation of why texts look like they do.

But once we do move away from the texts into an examination of their operational contexts we encounter surprises. For example, Priscilla Rogers and I (1992) have been studying corporate mission statements (short widely-distributed summaries of company goals, beliefs and values). Although the texts as texts have their interest (as in the choices of thematic subject: *Honeywell* believes... ; *Honeywell people* believe... ; *we* believe...) visits to two corporate headquarters and interviews with their senior management gave us strikingly different *rationales* for the use of mission statements. In one case the mission statement was perceived as holy writ brought down from the mountain by the company founder with the top executives holding to the view that it was their role to preserve this inherited vision. In the other very different case, the mission statement was seen as part of a complex strategy to save the company from serious trouble ; it was capstone to a major policy shift, and the process of writing it (involving hundreds of people) had been an integral element in the company's redirection. It seems, therefore, that such extra-textual excursions provide a valuable framework for aligning particular texts with their environments.

I will take a second illustration from Stephen Witte's long, ambitious and recent article entitled *Context, Text and Intertext* (1992). Witte is firm about the need for a more embracing theory:

All current approaches appear too narrow to permit a synthesis of the textual, cognitive, and social perspectives that Halliday suggests would be necessary for a comprehensive theory of language and, hence, writing, and no current theoretical approach to or perspective on writing accounts for writing as it is produced and used in contemporary culture (1992, pp. 241-142).

He illustrates his position by case studies of shopping lists, a minimalist genre if there ever was one. Shopping lists are interesting for at least the following reasons. They are one of the few types of written text that are regularly produced by a very high proportion of the population. They are firmly embedded in the ordinary daily stream of life (unlike other ubiquitous texts such as postcards). They call up and upon retrospective and prospective schemata. They stand as intermediaries (along with recipes and the like) between survey of the bare cupboard and anticipation of a small feast. Of Witte's three lists, list 3 looks the most interesting: it is the longest and seems to have some internal structure (first fruit and veg ; next dairy products, etc). So far so good. But Witte argues, persuasively I think, that we would be lucky to get to the rationale of list 3 without getting to know its producer. We need more socio-cognitive input than the text itself provides. It is possible that we might guess

that the text is not in fact organized into semantic categories of objects, but in terms of the aisle contents of the supermarket where the list-maker plans to shop. But we would probably not recognize that this particular route-map shopping list had the underlying rationale of driving its author around the store in such an efficient and timely manner that she would be restrained from what she described as « making compulsive purchases ». We see here the shopping list as not just an aide-mémoire for what to buy, but also as coercion for what not to buy.

Shopping is a structured social activity and, as Hasan reminds us, it varies from culture to culture in terms of such things as the legitimacy of price negotiation and the amount and type of interpersonal « leakage » (to use Erickson and Schultz's term) that can occur. We know too, as gesturing tourists, that it is an activity in which language can play, fortunately for us, a relatively minor role. Shopping is what James Gee in his interesting recent book entitled *Social Linguistics and Literacies* would call « a Discourse with a capital D », —

A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or « social network », or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful « role » (p. 143).

It follows for Gee that a Discourse with a capital D is inherently ideological since an individual will inevitably represent herself as having viewpoints, values and skills that make her central or marginal to any immediate social group. He adds,

All Discourses are the products of history, whether these be Discourses connected with academic disciplines like physics or history, or ones connected with academic practices like « essayist » writing-talking-and-thinking, or other school-based practices, or ones connected with businesses, government agencies, or other social institutions, or with Discourses embedded in local community identities such as « Afro-American », « Chicano », « Yuppie » or innumerable others » (p. 144).

He goes on to argue, somewhat more speculatively, that such discourses can only be acquired through apprenticeship and observation and cannot be learnt in formal settings, even though meta-language and analysis can help once the process of acquisition has started.

At this point we might well ask what all this might mean for descriptive functional linguistics in general and for genre analysis and stylistics in particular. The best we seem able to say is that when we are dealing with extensive numbers of texts, or with particular linguistic features, an exclusively textual approach would seem about all we can do. On the other hand, when we deal with individual texts (or clusters of them) we ignore investigating context of situation and context of culture at some peril ; and I mean *investigating* rather than some tokenist nod in the direction of its relevance.

As we pursue the agenda of looking for relations between genre and social life and social institutions, it is not surprising that many have been attracted to the structuration theory of prolific Cambridge sociologist Anthony Giddens. Giddens

appears to offer a theoretical solution to many of the dualisms that impinge upon social theory such as agent and structure, mind and institution, and *langue* and *parole*. As readers may know, structuration theory's central tenet is that social structures are actively produced, reproduced and altered by human agents who in turn utilize social structures in their recursive behaviors. Thus human agency and social structure are implicated in each other rather than being opposed. Human agency constitutes social structure, while social structure is the medium of human agency. In Giddens's own words in the *Central Problems of Social Theory*, the duality of structure refers to:

The essential recursiveness of social life as constituted in social practices: Structure is both *medium* and *outcome* of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of... social practices, and « exists » in the generating moments of this constitution. (1979, p. 5).

Of particular interest to people like us is Giddens's insistence that alongside political, economic and legal institutions there are linguistic and rhetorical rules and resources which are also institutions. Among these he instances « symbolic orders, or modes of discourse, and patterns of communication ». So a drawing on convention reconstitutes it. So at these particular moments my use (more or less) of standard English unintentionally reinforces it. The choice of this variety reaffirms its appropriateness for this context. My attempt to address some of the wider issues — and in ways both complicitous and contestatory — confirms the expectations that outsiders to the normal readership of this journal should play some such role. Further to that role would be my use of references to work from a wide range of fields and my choice of illustrative material ranging from the mundane to the significant. The outcomes of my verbal behavior thus constitute a re-affirmation and/or a minor modification of social institutions.

With genre being increasingly seen as the enactment of culture as it is embedded in institutional affairs, it is perhaps time to give more attention to systems of genres. I had an early stab at such linkages in *Genre Analysis* (1990, p. 177) when I offered the research article as situated at the center of a spider's web of abstracts, theses, presentations, grant proposals and books. I suggested that these different genres both institutionally and personally were at the same time symbiotic (feeding one off the other) and yet in a state of dynamic tension. They compete in researchers' and scholars' minds as scaled outcomes with various values attached to them as they nest in a kind of Chinese box: a couple of presentations might make an article, a bunch of articles might make a book, a book gets an invitation to a workshop, which... well you know the story. One important characteristic of this kind of network is that it is relatively unconstrained in both direction and timing. Not much is in effect a necessary and sufficient condition for something else. We as individual scholars potentially hold the initiative, even if we may lose it through inertia, through pressure of other commitments or through an inability to « just say no ».

I now believe that the foregoing account is seriously incomplete in at least two ways. First, it underplays the rhetorical and stylistic shifts required to move a text from one genre to another. Shifts across the medium divide and/or involving a radical change in audience are particularly onerous, which is why acceptable presentations do not easily make acceptable articles and why few theses or dissertations turn into successful books without considerable restructuring. Second, my simplistic account failed to acknowledge the generic systems that themselves control each of the genres — the cycles of inquiry, submission, review, revision, editing and so forth. Further, certain stages in this cycle, such as the review, may have their own generic sub-systems: the editor's letter to the reviewer, the printed instruction to the reviewer, the report, the reviewer's cover letter, the summative letter by the editor to the author, etc. (See Berkenkotter and Huckin: 1992 for an interesting case study).

One of the more transparent examples of genre systems in operation occurs in the law. Here is Bazerman on patent applications in the United States:

Systems of genre... are interrelated genres that interact with each other in specific settings. Only a limited range of genres may appropriately follow upon one another in particular settings, because the success conditions of the actions of each require various states of affairs to exist. That is, a patent may not be issued unless there is an application. An infringement complaint cannot be filed unless there is a valid patent. An affidavit about the events in a laboratory on a certain date will not be sworn unless a challenge to the patent is filed. (Bazerman: 1992, p. 21)

Further, Fredrickson (1992) has shown in a study of the genre-system of written documents in Swedish courts of Appeal that linguistic variation (as broadly conceived) is crucially dependent on the state of the case: whether the lawyer/author is representing the appellant or appellee, the loser or winner at the previous stage of the legal game. It thus seems clear that in terms of theory, in terms of accounting for language choice, and in terms of envisioning practical applications of our work, we might do well to pay increased attention in future to systems of genres.

I would next like to suggest that not enough attention has been given to the roles of humor, parody, pastiche, impersonation, send-up and ridicule in genre formation. One of the few who has done so is, of course, Bakhtin (1976) who introduces the concept of *re-accentuation* to cover the widespread uses of these devices: in literature, conversation, journalism and advertising. Since the heyday of Goffman, we have tended to neglect these features in our concerns with speech act theory, illocutionary force, negative and positive face, the perils and problems of cross-cultural communication, and so on. As I have written about this recently (e.g. Swales 1993), I will give just one example of how parody can indeed enlighten our understanding of genres. Here is a spoof abstract (attributed to Michael Swan):

*Interlanguage in MA Students*

Utterances of Applied Linguistics students can be sited along a continuum running from pure L1 forms (eg « We have to teach them to understand English ») to pure TL forms (eg « Our prime pedagogic task is to encourage strategies which will enhance the learner's capacity to attend to the pragmatic communicative semiotic macrocontext »). The paper

offers a choice of five models to account for non-systematic variability in the data, treating L2, IL and TL as hierarchically independent semipermeable systems in each case.

Parody, like the governor in a steam engine, acts as a corrective to runaway extremes. In this case, we can see how Swan takes the classic diction of Second Language Acquisition and turns it round to apply it to those very people who are striving to acquire that diction. In so doing, he is able to both offer « revenge » to the subjects of the studies and to expose the « pretensions » of those investigating their language acquisition processes. For those (like us) who are familiar with this kind of discourse, Swan's parodic shift of (literally) *subject-matter* comes as a salutary shock, reminding us of the rhetorical and stylistic conventions of our own discourse communities.

And so to the last of the four questions. The incorporation of structuration theory into many of the recent genre studies that I know (Bazerman: 1992, Miller: 1992, Berkenkotter and Huckin: 1992b, Yates and Orlikowski: 1992) subtly diminishes the value of a social constructionist account of the contemporary world. It was that account that has led me in recent years to spend some effort on trying to use the concept of discourse community as an actual sociorhetorical entity operating as a controlling matrix for genre use. I was, I suspect, rather too easily seduced by the concept of discourse community. Perhaps all too willingly I made common cause with all those who have their own agendas for viewing discourse communities as real, stable groups of consensus upholders. Admittedly, there are powerful forces out there including some of the intellectual heavyweights of our time: philosophers like Rorty who need a prevailing mindset on which to base non-representational theory of truth ; sociologists like Kuhn who need a paradigm in order to talk about paradigm shift ; and Sociologists of knowledge like Latour and Woolgar who need a social consensus on which to build a social account of scientific facts.

There are thus strong motives for holding the line on discourse community, especially when viewed as the controlling vehicle for genre agency and management. But there are equally strong questions and doubts. Theoretically, is discourse community a robust social construct, a defensible categorization of a particular and important kind of group ? Or is it just a convenient covering metaphor, or worse, a deluding vision allowing us the dubious facility of making tempting generalizations about the world and its words ? Or is it essentially a heuristic device for understanding the dynamic processes of qualification, entry, apprenticeship, full membership and lapse into old-fartage in specialized groups ? A way of seeing how non-egalitarian worlds manage their affairs, be they corporate or educational entities, minority interest groups, hobbyists or whatever ? A manual for the *Pilgrim's Progress* (replete with thickets, stony ground and sloughs) rewritable for each group of Pilgrims ?

In *Genre Analysis I* argued for a distinction between a speech community (a homogeneous sociolinguistic assemblage of people who share place and



background) and a discourse community (a heterogeneous sociorhetorical assemblage who share occupational or recreational goals and interests). The former Martha's Vineyard type of group is well known to linguists and anthropologists ; the latter has been left largely to ethnographers of the workplace (such as Sharon Traweek's depiction of the careers of particle physicists *Beamtimes and Lifetimes*).

I used in *Genre Analysis* as my main example of discourse community the Hong Kong Study Circle, a global network of 300 people (of many occupations and nationalities) who share nothing but a consuming interest in the history of Hong Kong stamps. My graduate students have persuaded me that my example, while making the point, is an extreme disjuncture of speech and discourse community. They observe on their Ann Arbor experience that academic or other discourse communities impinge on, interact with and contribute to the wider speech community. So we have university towns (Oxford, Ann Arbor, Madison) ; sporting towns (St. Andrews, Newmarket, Saratoga), government towns (Ottawa, Canberra), religious towns (Assisi, Mecca), fishing towns, company towns, tinseltowns and so forth. They see in academia concentric circles of co-membership radiating out from specialty or school to department to university to the locality. And as the process of moving from the inner core to the periphery occurs, the more the characteristics of a discourse community become confused with that of a speech community ; and the more we move from the invisible colleges of national or international special-group networks, the more purely local features exert their influence. And I am sure they are right. The « true » discourse community may be rarer and more esoteric than I once thought.

Although Arabella Lyon (1992) pays me the compliment of suggesting that my account of discourse community is a little less reductionist, a little less Utopian, and a little less static than that of many others, it still has those tendencies. She quotes with approval Barbara Hernnstein Smith's observation that too many scholars « miss and obscure » each individual's membership in multiple communities, communities that require many social roles, varied relationships with others, and subsequently « a collage... of allegiances, beliefs and sets of motives ». Nor is there anything in my criteria that expressly refers to forward momentum or the pursuit of novelty: new ways of doing business, new genres, new subject matter, new product, the creation of a new research space. Meanwhile many studies (Tom Huckin, Greg Myers, Carol Berkenkotter, etc.) of even the stodgiest research show it to be shot through with the negotiation of new knowledge claims, with surprise value and with a concern to be newsworthy. And does not every annual convention have its own new hot topics, its new or newly-rediscovered heroes, and its own new buzz words ?

In consequence of all this I find myself today easing away from the concept of discourse community as having material demographic or geographic substance. On the other hand, I do not see the concept as merely taxonomic either: a grouping that is established only for the convenience of some social scientist such as the tallying of Republican voters. There is, I think, a middle way which again reflects Giddens'

views of social structures as having some kind of « virtual existence ». We can envision, as Carolyn Miller says, a community as a rhetorical construct:

It is constituted by its characteristic joint rhetorical actions, its genres of interaction, of getting things done, including reproducing itself. (1992, p. 7)

A rhetorical community persists by instantiation and by engagement, rather than *existing* through membership and collectivity.

In this paper, I have tried to reposition myself to the prospects for stylistics. I have, however, not opted for the *horizontal*, as might be advocated by those who can bring computer power to extensive textual surfaces. Rather, I have used a sense of genre and its place in the world to situate textual studies within various kinds of contextual frame. In that sense, I would want to argue that the new horizons are in fact beneath our feet. If Witte may have come close to saying all that needs to be said about the genre of « shopping lists », then — to return to where I began — here is Marjorie Levinson again on the Romantic Fragment Poem (suitably acronymized, as occurs with most established genres):

Roughly speaking, the RFP owes its epochal specificity to certain stable, empirically available facts (composition ; publication and reception data) ; to the special social doctrinal and psychic purposes realized by the sign of indeterminacy in the early nineteenth century (the Romantic ideology) ; and to the position of the concept, « the fragmentary » in the critical and artistic discourses of the last fifty years (epistemological legacies of the Romantic ideology (1986, p. 8).

The irony, for those of us who have long been concerned with studying the properties of non-literary texts, of turning to literary critics for enlightenment and models of proceeding is not lost.

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