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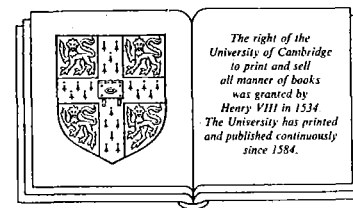
Genre Analysis

English in academic and research settings

John M. Swales

The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

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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 apologia, 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.

(Miller, 1984:155)

Secondly, she argues that 'a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish' (1984:151).

Thirdly, Miller gives serious attention to how genres fit into the wider scale of human affairs. She suggests that:

What we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have ...

(Miller, 1984:165)

As students and struggling scholars, we may learn that we may create a research space for ourselves, we may promote the interests of our discourse community, we may fight either for or against its expansion, we may uncouple the chronological order of research action from the spatial order of its description and justification, we may approach unexpected sources for funding, or we may negotiate academic or editorial decisions.

Genre analysts among the rhetoricians thus make a substantial contribution to an evolving concept of genre suitable for the applied purposes of this study. They provide a valuable historical context for the study of genre movements and they finally destroy the myth – or so I hope – that genre analysis *necessarily* has something to do with constructing a classification of genres. Miller's exceptional work reinforces the concept of genre as a means of social action, one situated in a wider sociorhetorical context and operating not only as a mechanism for reaching communicative goals but also of clarifying what those goals might be.

Overview

The foregoing brief survey of how genres are perceived in four different disciplines indicates something of a common stance. Its components can be summarized as follows:

1. a *distrust* of classification and of facile or premature prescriptivism;
2. a *sense* that genres are important for integrating past and present;
3. a *recognition* that genres are situated within discourse communi-

ties, wherein the beliefs and naming practices of members have relevance;

4. an *emphasis* on communicative purpose and social action;
5. an *interest* in generic structure (and its rationale);
6. an *understanding* of the double generative capacity of genres – to establish rhetorical goals and to further their accomplishment.

This stance suggests that it is indeed possible to use genres for teaching purposes without reducing courses to narrow prescriptivism or formalism and without denying students opportunities for reflecting upon rhetorical or linguistic choices.

3.5 A working definition of genre

This section offers a characterization of genres that I believe to be appropriate for the applied purposes that I have in mind, although detailed consideration of links to language-teaching activity and language-learning theory will be held over to Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. I shall proceed by making a series of short criterial observations, which will be followed in each case by commentary. Sometimes the commentaries are short and directly to the point; at other times they are more extensive as they explore wider discursal or procedural issues. I hope in this way – as the section title indicates – to create a sufficiently adequate characterization for others to be able to use, modify or reject as they think fit.

1. *A genre is a class of communicative events.*

I will assume that a communicative event is one in which language (and/or paralinguage) plays both a significant and an indispensable role. Of course, there are a number of situations where it may be difficult to say whether verbal communication is an integral part of the activity or not. Levinson neatly illustrates the possibilities for speech contexts:

On the one hand we have activities constituted entirely by talk (a telephone conversation, a lecture for example), on the other activities where talk is non-occurring or if it does occur is incidental (a game of football for instance). Somewhere in between we have the placing of bets, or a Bingo session, or a visit to the grocer's. And there are sometimes rather special relations between what is said and what is done, as in a sports commentary, a slide show, a cookery demonstration, a conjurer's show, and the like.

(Levinson, 1979:368)

Activities in which talk is incidental, as in engaging in physical exercise, doing the household chores, or driving, will not be considered as

communicative events; nor will activities that involve the eyes and ears in non-verbal ways such as looking at pictures or listening to music.

Secondly, communicative events of a particular class will vary in their occurrence from the extremely common (service encounters, news items in newspapers) to the relatively rare (Papal Encyclicals, Presidential Press Conferences). By and large, classes with few instances need to have prominence within the relevant culture to exist as a genre class. If a communicative event of a particular kind only occurs once a year it needs to be noteworthy for class formation: a TV advert using a talking dog will not do. Finally, and to repeat an earlier claim, a communicative event is here conceived of as comprising not only the discourse itself and its participants, but also the role of that discourse and the environment of its production and reception, including its historical and cultural associations.

2. *The principal criterial feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes.*

Placing the primary determinant of genre-membership on shared purpose rather than on similarities of form or some other criterion is to take a position that accords with that of Miller (1984) or Martin (1985). The decision is based on the assumption that, except for a few interesting and exceptional cases, genres are communicative vehicles for the achievement of goals. At this juncture, it may be objected that *purpose* is a somewhat less overt and demonstrable feature than, say, form and therefore serves less well as a primary criterion. However, the fact that purposes of some genres may be hard to get at is itself of considerable heuristic value. Stressing the primacy of purpose may require the analyst to undertake a fair amount of independent and open-minded investigation, thus offering protection against a facile classification based on stylistic features and inherited beliefs, such as typifying research articles as simple reports of experiments.

In some cases, of course, identifying purpose may be relatively easy. *Recipes*, for example, would appear to be straightforward instructional texts designed to ensure that if a series of activities is carried out according to the prescriptions offered, a successful gastronomic outcome will be achieved. In others it may not be so easy. For instance, we might suppose that the examination and cross-examination of witnesses and parties carried out by lawyers under an adversarial system of justice are designed and structured to elicit 'the facts of the case'. However, independent investigation shows this not to be so (Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Danet et al., 1980). The elaborate sequences of closed 'yes-no' questions are designed to control how much the hostile or friendly witnesses will be allowed to reveal of what, in fact, they do know.

Or, to take another example, we might suppose that the purposes of

party political speeches are to present party policies in as convincing a way as possible, to ridicule the policies and personalities of opposition parties, and to rally the faithful. However, especially in these days of massive television coverage, party political speeches may now be being written, structured and delivered in order to generate the maximum amount of applause (Atkinson, 1984). And certainly there are signs in Britain that the 'applause factor' is becoming raised in consciousness, as it were, not only as a result of the interest in Atkinson's work, but also because of the recently established journalistic practice of measuring the length of ovations following major speeches at conventions.

The immediately preceding example suggests that it is not uncommon to find genres that have *sets* of communicative purposes. While news broadcasts are doubtless designed to keep their audiences up to date with events in the world (including verbal events), they may also have purposes of moulding public opinion, organizing public behavior (as in an emergency), or presenting the controllers and paymasters of the broadcasting organization in a favorable light. When purposive elements come into conflict with each other, as in the early Environmental Impact Statements studied by Miller (1984), the effectiveness of the genre as sociorhetorical action becomes questionable. In the academic context, a genre with high potential for conflicting purposes is that of the student written examination (Searle, 1969; Horowitz, 1986a).

There remain, of course, some genres for which purpose is unsuited as a primary criterion. Poetic genres are an obvious example. Although there may be overt political, religious or patriotic tracts put out in the form of verse, the poetry that is taught, remembered, known and loved is rarely of that kind and inevitably makes an appeal to the reader or listener so complex as to allow no easy or useful categorization of purpose. Poems, and other genres whose appeal may lie in the verbal pleasure they give, can thus be separately characterized by the fact that they defy ascription of communicative purpose.

The need, in all but exceptional cases, to ascribe privileged status to purpose derives not only from a general recognition of the power it has to shape our affairs, but also because it provides a way of separating 'the real thing' from parody. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines *parody* as 'A composition in which the characteristic turns of thought and phrase of an author are mimicked and made to appear ridiculous, especially by applying them to ludicrously inappropriate subjects'. However, MacDonald (1960:557) is surely right when he complains that the final clause does not sufficiently distinguish parody from its poor relations, *travesty* and *burlesque*. Good parody is often applied to subject matter that is only slightly or subtly inappropriate. As a result, *content* and *form* may not reveal the fact that parody is being attempted, as in Cyril Connolly's parody of Aldous Huxley in 'Told in Gath' or Henry Reed's celebrated

Eliot-esque 'Chard Whitlow'. Consider, for instance, the opening two paragraphs from a paper by Michael Swan and Catherine Walter published in the *English Language Teaching Journal* entitled 'The use of sensory deprivation in foreign language teaching':

The term 'sensory deprivation' is probably familiar to most of us from recent reports of interrogation procedures, but it may seem strange to find the expression used in a discussion of language teaching, especially since, at first sight, it is difficult to imagine how *deprivation* of sensory input could contribute to learning. However, recent experiments in this field (carried out principally by the Chilton Research Association at Didcot, near Oxford) have suggested that sensory deprivation (SD) could well become a powerful pedagogic tool in the not too distant future. The purpose of this article is simply to provide a résumé of current research in SD; readers who would like more complete information are referred to the very detailed account by Groboshenko and Rubashov (1980).

Interest in the use of SD in language teaching arose initially as a natural extension of the work of such researchers as Gattegno, Rand Morton, Lozanov and Watanabe. Gattegno's refusal (in the 'Silent Way') to allow learners more than minimum access to the second language (L2) model; Rand Morton's insistence on eliminating meaning entirely from the early 'phonetic programming' stages of language learning; Lozanov's concern to purge the student of his former identity and to build a new, autonomous L2 personality through 'Suggestopaedia'; and finally Watanabe's controversial but impressive use of 'hostile environment' as a conditioning factor – all these elements are clearly recognizable in current SD practice. But SD goes a great deal further.

(Swan and Walter, 1982:183)

Most of the regular readers of *ELTJ* with whom I have discussed this paper stated that they read it with increasing incredulity. However, they also admitted that they were by no means sure it was a 'spoof' until they reached the end and saw the words 'Received 1 April 1982'. After all, the content is conceivable (just), and certainly not 'ludicrously inappropriate'. Further, the Swan and Walter paper is of an appropriate length, uses standard style, has the expected information-structure and is appropriately referenced, some of the references being genuine. Although the publication of this fake paper may have been an exceptional event in the world of language teaching publications, other academic groups, particularly scientists, have an established tradition of parodying both their research methods and their publication formats. For instance, there exist 'specialized' periodicals like the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* and the *Journal of Insignificant Research* (see Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984, Chapter 8 for an excellent discussion). In the end, although we may well

find contextual clues that help us to separate the spurious from the genuine, we need to rely on the privileged property of identifiable communicative purpose to disentangle the clever parody from 'the real thing'.

3. *Exemplars or instances of genres vary in their prototypicality.*

So far I have argued that genre membership is based on communicative purpose. What else is it based on? What additional features will be required to establish such membership? There are, as far as I can see, two possible ways of trying to find answers to such questions: the *definitional* approach and the *family resemblance* approach.

The definitional view is much the better established and, indeed, underpins the creation and worth of dictionaries, glossaries and specialized technologies. It asserts that, in theory at least, it is possible to produce a small set of simple properties that are individually necessary and cumulatively sufficient to identify all the members and only the members of a particular category from everything else in the world. Thus, a *bird* can be defined in terms of being an animal, having wings and feathers, and laying eggs, or some such list of properties. As long as the object has the stipulated features, it is a member of the category; it matters not whether the bird is a 'normal' one like a sparrow or a 'far-out' member of the category such as an ostrich or a penguin – they are all equally birds. The definitional view has had some success in certain areas. Kinship terms have been extensively analyzed in this way; a bachelor is 'an adult unmarried male' (Katz and Fodor, 1963); and other areas where it seems to work with relatively little problem are numbers (ordinal, cardinal, real, rational etc.) and physical and chemical elements. However, in practice, great difficulty has been experienced in drawing up lists or defining characteristics of such everyday categories as *fruit*, *vegetables*, *furniture* and *vehicles*. And if that is so, then there would appear little hope of identifying the all-or-none defining features of *lectures*, *staff meetings*, *research papers*, *jokes* or *consultations*. A further difficulty is created by the easily-attested phenomenon that we still recognize category membership even when many of the suggested defining characteristics are missing; the roast chicken emerging from the cooker is still identified as a *bird*. As Armstrong, Gleitman and Gleitman observe, 'It's not at all hard to convince the man in the street that there are three-legged, tame, toothless albino tigers, that are tigers all the same' (1983:296).

It might therefore be the case that what holds shared membership together is not a shared list of defining features, but inter-relationships of a somewhat looser kind. This indeed would seem to be the view taken by Wittgenstein in a justly famous passage in the *Philosophical Investigations* that is worth quoting in full: