

Genre Identification and Communicative Purpose: A Problem and a Possible Solution

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Since the early 1980s, in much of the work within a genre-analytic approach, communicative goal or purpose has been used as an important and often primary criterion for deciding whether a particular discourse falls within a particular generic category (book review, sales letter, cross-examination, etc.). However, as the number of genre studies has increased, and as genre theory has become more complex, the concept of 'communicative purpose' has also become more complex, multiple, variable and generally hard to get at. We believe that one consequence of these developments has gone largely unnoticed: that uncertainties surrounding communicative purpose undermine its claimed role as a means of assigning genre membership. In this paper we discuss this paradox, illustrate the difficulties that can arise, and then suggest a procedure whereby 'communicative purpose' can be retained as a viable and valuable concept.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the 'new' genre movement began to gather momentum in the early 1980s, there has been a widely-shared view that genres are best conceptualized as goal-directed or purposive. Martin (1985) claimed, in a famous formulation, that 'genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them' (p. 250); Miller (1984) argued that 'a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centred not on the substance or form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish' (p. 151); and Swales (1990), in attempts to define a genre, stressed the role of communicative purpose in any such definition. More recently Bhatia (1997) has suggested that 'taking communicative purpose as the key characteristic feature of a genre, the analysis attempts to unravel the mysteries of the artifact in question' (p. 313), and Johns (1997) has observed that 'because purpose is an important consideration, genres have often been categorised according to the particular jobs they are used to accomplish' (p. 24). Although Johns goes on to warn against attributing single purposes to genres, as have others, she also notes that 'One central point made by genre theorists and pedagogues in Australia and elsewhere is that purpose interacts with features of text at every discourse level' (1997: 25). While it is the case that not all leading proponents of genre-based approaches have privileged communicative purpose (for

example, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) pay little attention to this concept), it remains true that communicative purpose is imbricated in most major contemporary approaches to genre (Hyon 1996) and to their educational implications and applications.

Miller notes in her influential 1984 article that 'the urge to classify is fundamental' (p. 151), to which Johns (1997) concurs: 'It is a human trait to name and categorize, and for those who share genre knowledge within a culture, there is generally a shared name' (1997: 22). Despite this, the genre movement as a whole has not given the highest priority to taxonomizing *per se*, perhaps partly as a reaction against literary interest in such mapping, and partly from a belief that non-literary discourses have important functional roles to play over and beyond whatever classification might indicate. Indeed, attempts among the genre movement, such as Martin and Rothery's 'six elemental genres' (1981), to impose such taxonomic schemes have continued to prove controversial. Rather, the emphasis has been on categorization of discourses as members of particular classes ('Is this a sales letter?'; 'Is that text a research article?') often using adaptations of the classic work of Wittgenstein (1958) on 'family resemblances' or that of Rosch (1975) on prototype theory, rather than on overarching schemes covering whole universes of discourse, and this despite salutary recent interest in systems or sets of genres (for example, Bazerman 1994).

In fact, the great advances in recent years have not come from increased sophistication about the categorization of genres, and of subsequent more robust criteria for determining genre membership, but from a whole range of studies that have deepened and widened our understanding of the roles of discourse in contemporary society. We have seen, for one example, the emergence of a group of studies that has been able to trace the historical evolution of genres, such as Bazerman (1988) for the research article and Yates and Orlikowski (1992) for the business memo. Important work has been done on the processes of genre production (for example, Myers 1990) and on genre reception (Rogers 2000). Further, contemporary accounts of non-literary genres have established for themselves a multidisciplinary set of nodes of connection. Key elements in this network include Bakhtin (1986) and his notion of intertextuality; Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration (glossed by a management professor of our acquaintance as 'the wheels of life go round, and as they go round, they form ruts which channel the wheels of life'); Vygotsky (for example, 1978) and his important work on such matters as the Zone of Proximal Development, the value of 'scaffolding' in learning, and the situatedness of many cognitive processes; and Critical Discourse Analysis, as developed by Fairclough (for example, 1992) and others, which has offered, *inter alia*, a useful critique of the complex relationships between power and genre. In terms of methodology, there has been increasing employment of discourse-based interviews and other even more ethnographic techniques such as 'shadowing' (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998), or the following around of key professionals for days—or even weeks—as they go about their

quotidian discursal and non-discursal tasks. As Duranti and Goodwin (1992) and Tracy (1998) advocate, context has been promoted from merely being part of the background 'noise' to the foreground. In consequence, it is becoming increasingly accepted that cognition is at least partly 'situated' in the milieu in which it evolves (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995), and that rhetorical knowledge is at least partly 'local' (Prior 1998) and thus acquired in and shaped by particular educational and personal circumstances.

One of the inadvertent consequences of these important developments would seem to be that 'communicative purpose' has assumed a taken-for-granted status, a convenient but under-considered starting point for the analyst. However, most of the important work following the early publications in this field has, in various ways, established that the purposes, goals, or public outcomes are more evasive, multiple, layered, and complex than originally envisaged. How then, as Askehave (1998, 1999) argues, can communicative purpose be used to *decide* whether a particular text qualifies for a membership in one particular genre as opposed to another? If communicative purpose is typically ineffable at the outset, or only establishable after considerable research, or can lead to disagreements between 'inside' experts and 'outside' genre analysts, or indeed among the experts themselves, how can it be retained as a 'privileged' guiding criterion (Swales 1990)? In this paper, we first attempt to bring this paradoxical situation into clearer focus, then discuss a number of cases that illustrate the difficulty of ascribing communicative purpose, and finally suggest a procedure that might allow the valuable concept (especially in applied contexts) of communicative purpose to be retained.

DISCUSSIONS OF 'COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSE'

One of the most extensive definitional discussions of the concept remains that of Swales (1990):

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style.

Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. . . . The genre names inherited and produced by discourse communities and imported by others constitute valuable ethnographic communication, but typically need further validation (Swales 1990: 58).

One immediate consequence of this kind of functional approach is that genres are envisaged not so much in terms of categories of discourse but rather as social or communicative events. Furthermore, the definition tries to set up a

relationship between the purpose accomplished by a genre and the structure of the genre by suggesting that the communicative purpose of a genre (a 'privileged' criterion) shapes the genre and provides it with an internal structure—a schematic structure. Another claimed benefit of 'purpose' is that it allows the analyst to retain and maintain a 'narrow' concept of genre; in effect, if two otherwise-similar texts have different communicative purposes, they would have to be categorized under different genres. According to the definition these purposes are 'recognized' by the experts in the relevant area, and can presumably be elicited from them by the analyst. In this way, politicians could specify the purposes of news conferences, scientists those of research papers, and judges those of jury instructions, and so forth. But just as Swales at the end of his definition questions reliance on the 'genre names' used by groups in terms of their accuracy, reliability, and insight, so similar doubts can surely be raised about insider views on 'communicative purposes'.

Earlier, Swales had himself acknowledged that 'purpose' was not without its attendant difficulties as a key determinant of genre membership:

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 feature and inherited beliefs, such as typifying research articles as simple reports of experiments (Swales 1990: 46).

It now seems clear from this discussion that expert opinion about purposes is ultimately of no greater credibility than that about nomenclature. For one thing, experts in a professional community may not always agree about the purpose of a genre. Even if they do agree, the above passage suggests that genre analysts may have their own duties to perform in ferreting out the underlying rationales of genres. In effect, if scientists say that research articles are in fact just 'simple reports of experiments', and doubtless some may say this, then they can eventually be shown to be wrong. Certainly, at this stage in the argument, it would seem that assigning communicative purpose to a text or class of text is neither always an easy nor a quick matter.

Before we look at some case studies that might throw empirical light on the problematics of assigning communicative purpose, it would be useful to consider the position of Bhatia (1993), where he offers this extension of Swales' definition of genre:

it is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form

and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognized purpose(s) (Bhatia 1993: 13).

As can be seen, the principal change occurs in the third sentence, and in later commentary, Bhatia observes that Swales (1990) 'underplays psychological factors, thus undermining the importance of tactical aspects of genre construction, which play a significant role in the concept of genre as a dynamic social process, as against a static one' (1993: 16). One of Bhatia's illustrations of such tactics is that of experienced news reporters, who may be able to insinuate their own preferred political perspectives under the appearance of objective news reports. Indeed, it is this kind of situation that leads Bhatia to stress the importance of having a 'specialist informant' who can double-check findings, or otherwise guide analysts in their investigations. Whether or not Bhatia is correct in his observations, the spectres of strategic manipulation and private intentions are all too likely to add further elements to the 'set' of communicative purposes and thus further complicate the ascription process. More generally, Swales had already acknowledged the complexities caused by various kinds of insider knowledge: '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 behaviour (as in an emergency), or presenting the controllers and paymaster of the broadcasting organization in a favorable light' (1990: 47). Although we do not precisely find 'private intentions' here, we certainly recognize that certain players may know 'the rules of the game' and have longer-term perspectives on underlying strategies and institutional dispositions. In consequence, we are no longer looking at a simple enumerable list or 'set' of communicative purposes, but at a complexly layered one, wherein some purposes are not likely to be officially 'acknowledged' by the institution, even if they may be 'recognized'—particularly in off-record situations—by some of its expert members.

Despite these increasing difficulties with the *operationalization* of a concept of communicative purpose, especially as an instrument of categorization, it continues to influence LSP approaches, perhaps especially in the area of business communications. For example Nickerson (1999: 40) lists several studies that have classified business discourses on the basis of Swales (1990), or of Orlikowski and Yates (1994) and their ascription of 'socially recognized communicative purpose'. Anderson's 1998 article is actually entitled 'Business letter genres: A communicative-purpose based approach', and a clear instance of the continuing currency of 'communicative purpose' can be seen from this extract from a recent paper:

In search of the generic nature of the fax, the content of the English language data was examined in more detail. Using the framework introduced by Swales (1990) and developed by Bhatia (1993), the 'main

purpose' of each message was identified, and the 'rhetorical moves' used to achieve the purpose were analysed. Naturally, the general, all-encompassing purpose of business messages is to achieve the goals of a buying–selling negotiation, but underneath this 'umbrella' seven sub-purposes could be identified (Akar and Louhiala-Salminen 1999: 212–13).

We can see then that communicative purpose remains a key concept in many genre-based approaches. Indeed, discussion so far would suggest that it may have heuristic value as a way of entering into a better understanding of a corpus of discourses; that it may have a role to play in showing how discourses can indeed be multi-functional; and that it can be used to disqualify certain broader aggregations of discourses, such as those commonly described by registral labels such as *journalese*, as having genre status. However, communicative purpose cannot by itself help analysts to quickly, smoothly, and incontrovertibly decide which of texts A, B, C, and D belong to genre X and which to genre Y because those analysts are unlikely to know at the outset what the communicative purposes of texts A, B, C, and D actually are. Rather, what is immediately manifest to the genre analyst is not purpose but form and content. Further, even when a discourse may reflexively and overtly refer to its own purpose, as in 'The purpose of this letter is to inform you that you have exceeded your overdraft limit', it would be rash, we would like to suggest, to always take such statements at face value.

ILLUSTRATING THE QUANDARY

To explore these issues we take three examples, ostensibly in increasing order of complexity of communicative purpose, of textual and rhetorical complexity, and of length. These are (1) shopping lists; (2) short 'response' letters to recommendations; and (3) company brochures.

Shopping lists

The shopping list must be one of the humblest of Miller's 'homely' genres. It may be an unordered list (as when we jot down a number of needed items as they come to mind), or it may be ordered in some way, perhaps in terms of a convenient order of shops to visit, or in terms of classes of object, or even in terms of supermarket aisles. Nomenclature tends to be sparse and we would be unlikely to find too many instances of descriptors like '1/4 kilo of those luscious fat black Kalamata olives glistening so wonderfully in their brine'. In terms of use, the shopping list is typically hand carried and frequently consulted, most people ticking items off or crossing them out as they are obtained. On a wider front, some cultural variation in the use of shopping lists can be anticipated. Casual observations in Danish supermarkets suggest that close to half of the patrons pushing carts (as opposed to carrying hand-baskets) rely on shopping lists, while similar observations in the Arab World

suggest that this proportion is probably much lower, perhaps because of the highly efficient and highly-trained memories of members of that latter culture.

As for the communicative purpose of shopping lists, that seems simple enough. Surely, a shopping list is a working *aide-mémoire* for the shopper, reminding the shopper what he or she needs to buy. It is typically hand written on a small or folded piece of paper by the shopper him- or herself, or by a family member or domestic partner. However, when Witte (1992) interviewed shoppers as they exited a California supermarket he found rather greater variation in communicative purpose than we might suppose. Witte in fact discovered that some shoppers used their lists primarily to impose discipline on themselves. For these shoppers, the shopping list operated by default as an injunction about what not to buy ('if not on the list, don't buy it') and thus was used to prevent impulse purchases. Of course, it is hard to ascertain how widespread Witte's alternative use actually is, although it would be reasonable to suppose that its use would be more frequent among those in straitened financial circumstances or those on a diet! Nor do we know if there are any textual consequences of the 'anti-impulse' as opposed to the 'aide-mémoire' purpose. If we assume not, then we have reached the uncomfortable position—at least for all those who stress the categorizing role of communicative purpose—of having identical or near identical texts fulfilling rather different communicative purposes.

Despite all the difficulties, it is very hard to dispense with some concept like 'purpose' altogether and rely entirely on formal features. After all, shopping lists (and shopping) are common features of beginners' situational language classes and hence are there used for language learning purposes. Alternatively, this ostensible shopping list:

Lemon and lime
Cabbage and kale
Parsley and thyme
Sherry and ale

might actually be a poem. Finally, if we admit Bhatia's private intentions into the scenario, then a shopping list might even be an instrument of romantic hope. Consider this situation: A young man, long enamoured of the young woman behind the delicatessen counter, prepares for his visit there a meticulous shopping list designed to convince her of his fitness as a domestic partner.

Response letters to recommendations

Our second example of a 'multi-purposeful' genre is from the academic world—more specifically the process concerned with appointing junior faculty at American universities. When applying for an assistant professor position, applicants tend to invite three to five professors to write references that can be

sent to all the institutions which have asked for them. The references are almost entirely laudatory of the candidate these days, partly because of the competitiveness of the job market and perhaps partly because of concern about potential litigation if negative comments are made. It now appears that such letters of reference, at least in the US Business School context, can generate a short official note of acknowledgement and thanks—what we might call a ‘response letter’ (Swales *et al.*, 2000). Here is a typical example (pseudonyms have been used):

Dear Dr. Moore,
 Thank you very much for your letter of recommendation for Alan Kim for a position on our faculty. Recommendations are an important part of our recruiting process and we appreciate the time and effort you put into providing thoughtful information. We will be getting back in touch with Mr Alan Kim as our recruitment process unfolds.
 Thanks again for your efforts on Mr Kim’s behalf and our recruiting process.
 Sincerely yours
 (signature, name, professorial title and position)

As might be expected, a response letter is generally short, averaging about 3.5 sentences in the small corpus of 14 response letters at our disposal. It consists of three parts: an opening, a body, and a closing. The body of response letters contains a selection from the following themes: thanking; appreciation of the time and effort taken; information on the recruitment process; and an indication of follow-up with the applicant. Perhaps the most interesting ‘move’ in the small corpus examined by Swales *et al.* (2000) consists of statements about the onerous nature of recommendation letter writing such as: ‘We appreciate your time and effort in writing this letter, and will be using it to aid our decision’. Here we see determined attempts to communicate appreciation for the considerable work involved, and to reassure the recommender that his or her efforts have not been in vain.

On the simplest level, we might conclude that these response letters are just straightforward notes thanking recommendation writers for their time and effort. But then the question arises as to why the professorial response letter writers should go to this trouble when there is no general expectation in the academy that they need to do so. Given this, one possible answer might lie in reciprocity of correspondence as a kind of administrative *politesse*. Since the recommendation writer (or perhaps his or her secretary) takes the time to personally address (and re-address) reference letters, then an equally personalized note of response might be anticipated. Other explanations might include a wish to recognize and valorize this ‘free service’, perhaps especially as some institutions now seem willing to pay for tenure and promotion evaluations, or a wish to especially thank an outsider who works neither in psychology nor management (as was the case in our corpus). The

response letters could additionally be seen as part of an institutional strategy designed to ensure a continued flow of good-quality recommendation letters.

A further possible motive might be to use the response letter as a way of indirectly promoting the particular institution in the eyes (and memory?) of the recommender. The response letters are often printed on rather fancy stationery and are signed by fellow academics. And then there is always the null hypothesis as it were; that perhaps after all there is no real or compelling rationale for these epistolary responses beyond the fact that, say, 20 years ago some head of department started this system and nobody since has bothered to stop it. In other words, the 'set of communicative purposes' that motivates the apparent extension of the system of genres (Bazerman 1994) that orchestrates the faculty appointment process in the United States remains, for the present, obscure. As Swales notes, 'We need more socio-cognitive input than the text itself provides' (1993: 690).

Company brochures

Our final example concerns a putatively more complex genre in terms of communicative purpose, textual/rhetorical features, and length—namely the company brochure. In Askehave (1998) an elaborate attempt is made, as is usual in genre analysis, to establish what the purpose of this particular genre actually is, but not so much in order to categorize the text as such but to look at the company brochure as a 'staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity' (Martin 1984: 25).

It might be tempting to simply conclude, as Bhatia (1993: 59) in fact does, that the company brochure is a 'promotional genre' and consequently that its communicative purpose is that of 'promoting something' (in this case the company). However, one problem with Bhatia's depiction of this communicative purpose is that it remains very general and so does not contribute much to the description of the genre as an intentional and purposeful activity, particularly as conceptualized from the viewpoint of the producer/sender. Askehave (1998) tries to uncover some of the so-called 'underlying' intentions behind a company brochure apart from the 'all-encompassing' one of promoting the company. Using the basic tenets of systemic functional linguistics (namely that the cultural and situational context adds meaning and purpose to a text), Askehave argues that if we want to discover and identify the purpose of a text, we cannot avoid investigating the context in which the text is used. Thus in order to move beyond the obvious purpose of 'promoting something' and to deduce what the company is trying to achieve through its promotion, we need to turn to the industrial market and the goals and intentions of the participants in the industrial market.

Certainly, the company brochures studied in Askehave (1998) are, on one level, primarily used as promotional material in the industrial market. However, an analysis of the cultural context suggests that the establishment of long-lasting trading relationships is paramount in today's industrial

market—thus being able to enter into co-operative relations is viewed as an essential tool and a highly valued asset. It follows that one of the main marketing objectives of a company operating in the industrial market is to project a company as a qualified and respectable trading partner, and here the company brochure can now be seen as playing an important role. Even though the brochures cannot establish such partnerships in themselves, they can facilitate this establishment by *presenting the company as a qualified partner*, and this, Askehave suggests, emerges as the underlying and central purpose of the company brochures she examined.

The analysis of linguistic features in the brochures of the two companies studied in depth also supports and reflects the proposed interpretation of projecting an image as an available and reliable business partner. For example, the analysis of semantic relations reveals that chains of lexical items sharing the semantic features of so-called 'partnership qualities' (such as innovation, skills, quality, customer care, co-operation, etc.) are extremely frequent in the brochures. The analysis of lexicogrammatical features, such as transitivity patterns, shows that the companies present themselves as playing the active role in processes concerned with co-operation (for example, the company *works* with you, the company *offers* you, the company *supplies* you, etc.); the companies also govern attributive clauses that reiterate the partnership qualities mentioned above (for example, the company *is in the business of helping you*, the company *is at the forefront of materials and production technology*). However, the above analysis, as with our discussion of 'response letters', does not yet exclude the possibility of further or ancillary purposes. A brochure may for example be used internally in a company to inform employees about its core values, especially if the brochure contains a mission statement (Swales and Rogers 1995), or it may be designed to strengthen the corporate culture and create team spirit. Furthermore, it is tempting to suggest that a newly established company might produce a brochure because it regards the brochure as a token of the company's existence; i.e. if a company has a brochure, it is a 'real' company. Thus the company brochure is indeed a multifunctional text whose communicative purposes pose a real challenge to the analyst.

SEARCHING FOR A SOLUTION

So far we have tried to demonstrate that communicative purpose can be sufficiently elusive to be largely unavailable for the initial or early identification and categorization of discourses as belonging to certain genres. One radical solution to this elusiveness would be to dispense with the concept altogether, much along the lines of Halliday and Hasan (1989), who rely on the existence and arrangement of obligatory structural elements for identification. They regard a text as an instance of a genre if it includes the obligatory elements of a structural formula (a formula which is determined by Halliday's variables of field, tenor, and mode). However, this solution is not

entirely unproblematic either. If obligatory elements function as a criterion for classifying texts into a particular genre, what about all the occasions where 'obligatory' elements are not present? As pointed out by Ventola (1987) we may end up regarding quite similar texts as instances of different genres, because slight variations in field, tenor, or mode trigger different structural formulas. Furthermore, in Halliday's register theory the function of a text is treated as an aspect of the contextual variable 'mode'. Thus the system has the strongly inherent danger of conflating genre (rhetorical functions) and channel (mode). As Martin (and many others) have observed:

This distinction between the purpose of a text (genre) and the way it is transmitted (mode) is an important one because so many of our folk linguistic terms confuse mode and genre. Letters to the editor for example are usually hortatory expositions sent through the mail and have much more in common with political speeches than with other types of letter (Martin 1985: 17).

Further, a purely formal approach soon runs up against the widespread uses in contemporary society of generic humor, impersonation, parody, pastiche, and send-up. In a post-modern era when Bakhtin (especially Bakhtin 1986) remains a powerful influence in many fields, it is hard to avoid recognizing that his 're-accentuations' (or reflexive re-usages of earlier textual fragments for different purposes) are common in literature, journalism, advertising, politics, and the like. Most pertinently, as Bex (1996) observes, '[In a parody] It could be argued, then, that all the surface features of the genre have been adequately met' (1996: 138). Consider the following text, which ostensibly has all the features of the kind of 'short abstract' that appears in the programmes for applied linguistics conferences:

Interlanguage in MA Students

Utterances of Applied Linguistics students can be sited along a continuum running from pure L1 forms (for example, 'We have to teach them to understand English') to pure TL forms (e.g '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.

This wonderful two-sentence take-off of our own rhetorical practices is particularly successful because it takes the classic diction of SLA and subverts it by applying it to those very people (those MA students) who are being trained to acquire that diction. It has all the surface features we might expect of a short abstract, but it is of course a parody, and one we believe to have been composed by Michael Swan several years ago.

If an approach relying on surface and structure can prove unreliable and insufficiently discriminating, an alternative solution might be to restrain our concept of communicative purpose to what is, after all, basic and transparent.

For example, Martin (1992) offers the following characterization of 'telos' (or communicative purpose):

It should be stressed here that bringing telos into contextual theory at this point in no way implies that the text is being interpreted as the realisation of the speaker's intentions: genres are social processes, and their purpose is being interpreted here in social, not psychological terms (Martin 1992: 503).

However, the way this focus on purely 'social' purpose has worked in the writings of Martin and his associates has been to settle for a broad and restricted group of what European discourse analysts would call 'text types', such as instruction, description, recount, etc. Although Martin may rightly claim that there is pedagogical merit in such a scheme, it leaves too many interesting questions unanswered. For example, an instructional text accompanying some medicinal product might variously or cumulatively provide background information, explain how to use the product, satisfy government regulations, prevent accidents, protect the manufacturer from product liability, or offer trouble-shooting procedures (Askehave and Zethsen 2000). What then, we might like to know, are the linguistic and pragmatic correlates of such multiplicity?

There are a number of further variants of this 'broad-band' approach. Recall that the quotation we offered earlier from Akar and Louhiala-Salminen (1999) contained the phrase 'Naturally, the general all-encompassing purpose of business messages is to achieve the goals of a buying-selling negotiation'. On the one hand, it is widely recognized that business is premised on competition among the parties involved, but, on the other, this turns out to be a difficult recognition for genre analysts who work in business communications and who need some 'umbrella' concept to hold their message exchanges together. Askehave (1998) reveals the role of a brochure as part of a search for business partners, but we equally know that companies can be as much concerned with replacing their traditional partners in favour of getting new and better ones. The 'all-encompassing' purpose sits uncomfortably with all those business moves that are concerned with dismissing inefficient, negligent or costly suppliers and the like. And if we return to the shopping-list genre, we might again opt for some higher-order characterization that might cover the alternate purposes uncovered by Witte (1992), such as proposing that a shopping list is 'designed to orchestrate purchasing expeditions in an efficient and prudent manner', but now such a characterization would seem to 'leak' into other genres, such as faxed or phoned orders for pick-up or delivery and the like.

Finally, a bolder variant of this 'broad-band' approach can be seen in Bhatia's (1993) argument that promotional letters and job application letters belong to the same genre because the over-riding communicative purpose of both is to promote something (be it company, person, or product). While such linkages and similarities can be enlightening, they violate what we commonly

believe to be comparable ‘rhetorical action’. In fact, Miller, back in 1984, had already made an important distinction between ‘similar rhetorical action’ and ‘typified rhetorical action’. In the latter the similarities need to be extended to the same expected type of situation and the same expected type of participants and thus need to go beyond the same type of rhetorical action *per se* (see Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (1999) for further discussion). These seem to us to be sensible constraints (and would incidentally have the advantage of denying typification to shopping lists that are poems, parodies, love letters or language teaching materials). In this respect, Bhatia’s coalescence of two very different kinds of promotional texts, with very different kinds of audiences, into the ‘same’ genre creates rather more problems than it solves.

In response to these puzzles with regard to parodic and overarching purposes and so on, we now suggest that it would be prudent to abandon communicative purpose as an immediate or even a quick method for sorting discourses into generic categories, even if the analyst can and should retain the concept as a valuable—and perhaps unavoidable—long-term outcome of the analysis. Our proposed procedures depend somewhat on whether the investigator follows a traditional text-first or ‘linguistic’ approach, or an alternate context-first or ‘ethnographic’ one, as adopted by Beaufort (1997, 2000), Gunnarsson (1997), Swales (1998), and Winsor (2000). We deal with the former first and suggest the five steps shown in Figure 1.

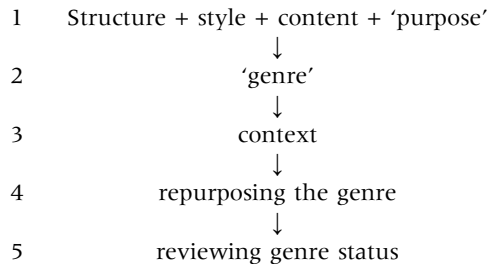


Figure 1: A text-driven procedure for genre analysis

A few explanatory comments are perhaps in order. First, it is important to note that ‘content’ should also include close attention to what is *not* said or written (Huckin 1999) because it is often in omissions that we find disciplinary and professional conventions most strongly at work (Dressen and Swales 2000). Second, the first or earliest uses of *purpose* (in step 1) and *genre* (in step 2) have been placed in scare-quotes to indicate their provisional status at these stages in the procedure. Third, in an age when institutions seem to be ‘re-engineering’ or ‘re-missioning’ themselves, we do not feel we need to apologize unduly for introducing the neologism ‘repurposing’. Fourth, at the present time we prefer to think of ‘reviewing genre status’ as a somewhat open category, that might involve reviewing genre boundaries, or

making a case for a new genre or for the atrophy or transmogrification of an old one. Finally, we do not have space here to discuss or define what we understand by 'context'. Rather, we feel that it is best left as a 'black box' which can then be operationalized by individual investigators according to their circumstances. As Van Dijk notes, 'There is no *a priori* limit to the scope and level of what counts as relevant context' (1997: 14), although as analysts we are all aware of some version of the Law of Diminishing Returns as our inquiries expand in time and space beyond the corpus in hand.

The alternative procedure is a little more complicated and is illustrated in Figure 2.

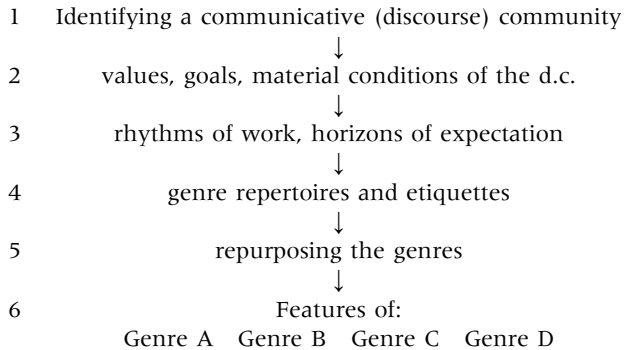


Figure 2: A context-driven procedure for genre analysis

Doubtless, schematic depictions of procedures, such as we have given in Figures 1 and 2, are idealized and sanitized, but they do show that ascribing communicative purposes to a complex of genres is a late stage in the process. The 'ethnographic' approach, while labour intensive, has also produced striking results. Beaufort (2000), in her study of writing in a non-profit organization, is able to establish a hierarchy of genres depending on the time and resources spent on them and on the relative importance of the constituency addressed. Swales (1998) explored text-making and text-makers in a university herbarium and was able to show that systematic botanists operate within a genre set of *flora*, *monograph*, and *treatment* that is quite different to that typically assumed for academic research in the biological sciences (Myers 1990), while Winsor revealed in her study of 'Agricorp' the political aspect of genre as social action by identifying 'work orders as a genre that both triggered and concealed the work of the technicians, allowing it to disappear into the work of the engineers' (Winsor 1990: 155).

The proposed procedures also offer promise of investigations that are sensitive to the evolving and dynamic nature of genres. Hyland (2000) has recently shown that the book review has changed its purposes somewhat during its life span. In the past, company brochures were presumably simple

depictions of products produced or services offered. Today, products and services may be downplayed; instead the company's fitness for future business relationships may be highlighted, or its role as a decent civic or environmental citizen, or, most recently, as a significant player in e-commerce. Repurposing thus encourages assessment and potential recalibration of any genre set: as Yates and Orlikowski (1992) observe 'the business letter and the meeting might at one point be genres, whereas at another point, these types of communication might be considered too general and the recommendation letter or the personnel committee meeting might better capture the social sense of recurrent situation' (1992: 303). The notion of 'repurposing the genre' also provides a useful corrective against a realist position with regard to nomenclature. In this respect, a particularly valuable study is Mauranen (1994) who showed, among other things, that 'a tutorial' has very different connotations and denotations in Finnish and British universities, and we dare say such cultural differences can easily be multiplied. Even within a unitary system, sociohistorical conventions can ensure that labelling practices acquire a symbolic value that overrides any simple notion of communicative purpose (Kramsch personal communication). As tertiary institutions become more sensitive to the needs and hopes of their students (and their parents), there may be considerable symbolic advantage in maintaining the genre label 'tutorial' as indicating a personalized interaction between 'tutor' and 'tutee', when in fact the *soi-disant* tutorial is today handled entirely by computer. In a similar way, that traditionally threatening final rite of passage, the doctoral defence, has in many countries taken on an epideictic flavour and lost much of its inquisitory character. 'Repurposing' encourages sociorhetorical study of such trends and also allows attention to focus on the highly contemporary issue of how technological advance affects the way in which genre-exemplars are perceived and ranked in relation to their mode of transmission: telex, fax, phone, e-mail, face-to-face meeting, video-conference, on-line journal, print journal, and so on.

These observations point to another advantage of our procedures—they point to the fact that genre categorization, as an issue of applied linguistic practice, is more a matter of extensive text-in-context inquiry than straightforward textual or transcriptal scrutiny on the one hand, or introspective system building, on the other. As Candlin (2000) has recently noted in his introduction to Hyland's monograph on academic discourse, 'This multiple modality in research methodology, involving description, interpretation and explanation, is increasingly to be recommended over, say, a narrowly text-based analysis, typical of many genre studies' (Candlin 2000: xix). While it may remain true that a genre can be *defined* as 'a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes' (Swales 1990: 58) or as 'an aggregation of communicative events that fulfil a common social function' (Bex 1996: 137), for the analyst, the *discovery* of those communicative purposes in most putative genres, and the inclusion or exclusion of marginal or odd genre-exemplars, is sufficiently

fraught with uncertainties and misapprehensions to be typically 'a matter of prolonged fieldwork'. We thus suggest that purpose (more exactly sets of communicative purposes) retains the status as a 'privileged' criterion, but in a sense different to the one originally proposed by Swales. It is no longer privileged by centrality, prominence or self-evident clarity, nor indeed by the reported beliefs of users about genres, but by its status as reward or pay-off for investigators as they approximate to completing the hermeneutic circle.

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