

# Genres of Discourse and the Definition of Literature

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There is a direct relation between genres of discourse and the definition of literature. A prototype-theoretical perspective on the classification of discourse can reveal that such genres as the novel, the poem, and the play, as well as such superordinate classes of discourse as literature, advertising, and academic writing, are all distinct classes of discourse but at different levels of abstraction. More important, superordinate, basic level, and subordinate classes of discourse have different numbers of typical values for the range of possible discourse attributes. The question of the definition of literature is, hence, related to the literary genres from which literature is abstracted, although the study of literary genres and literature is also connected to the study of nonliterary genres and other discourse classes. Such an approach can also explain what goes wrong in some recent proposals on the definition of literary discourse.

What kind of discourse is literature? What sort of theoretical category should be reserved for literary discourse in a general taxonomy of discourse? Is it a function, as has been proposed by Brewer (1995)? Is it a domain, as has been suggested by Schmidt (1982)? Or is the issue more complex than that, as argued in this article?

It is the aim of this contribution to address these questions. To provide an answer to the question of the definition of literature, it is first necessary to develop a general approach to the classification of discourse. The next section discusses the nature of literature within this general framework. The descriptive and explanatory potential of this approach is finally suggested in the conclusion.

## TOWARD A TAXONOMY OF DISCOURSE

It is an astonishing fact that discourse psychologists have not been overly concerned with creating a sophisticated taxonomy of discourse. With an explicit reference to work done on literary comprehension, the need for such a taxonomy

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was recently acknowledged by, for instance, Graesser, Gernsbacher, and Goldman (1997). However, their suggestion that we develop the traditional quartet of narrative, expository, persuasive, and descriptive discourse into a "more mature classification scheme [with] numerous subcategories, as well as hybrids" (p. 315) is still too simple and monodimensional to capture the complexities of relations between all kinds of discourse.

The work on literature referred to by Graesser et al. (1997) has been carried out by literary scholars who have undertaken empirical studies to examine the behavioral side of their subject, systematically opposing literary to nonliterary discourse as an experimental factor in their designs (e.g., Sanders & Redeker, 1993; Steen, 1994; Zwaan, 1993). However, the opposition between literary and nonliterary discourse is still a crude one, and its operationalization by means of popular genres such as short stories and poems on the one hand and news reports on the other raises all kinds of questions about the relations between genres and other groupings of classes of discourse, such as literature. This may have been the reason for a surge of interest in the notion of genre in what has come to be known as the empirical study of literature (e.g., Brewer, 1995; Fishelov, 1995; Viehoff, 1995). It is interesting to see that these theoretical contributions go back to both more traditional literary theoretical sources, such as Todorov (1976), Fowler (1982), and Bakhtin (1986), as well as to linguistic approaches to discourse, including Hymes (1972), Swales (1990), and Biber (1994).

The function of a general taxonomy of discourse is manifold. It may serve a linguistic purpose in the systematic ordering of text and talk into well-motivated categories of discourse in order to facilitate research into relations between linguistic features and discourse types (e.g., Biber, 1989). A discourse taxonomy may also have a psychological purpose, in that it provides a framework for the study of particular aspects of production and comprehension processes, such as the incidence of particular kinds of inferencing in narrative comprehension (e.g., Graesser & Kreuz, 1993). Finally, a taxonomy for discourse can also serve sociological ends, with respect to the delineation of particular large-scale social and cultural spheres of communication, variously called *domains*, *systems*, or *fields*, such as the one of science (e.g., Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). Although the references suggest that work is being done in each of these areas today, categories, dimensions, and levels of abstraction vary between disciplines and domains of research, and a unified theoretical framework to a typology of discourse could help to align such projects.

It is clear that each of these functions is also relevant to the empirical study of literature. We need a systematic framework for the description and explanation of a particular body of discourse (e.g., van Peer, 1991), for the investigation of psychological processing issues related to that collection (e.g., Schram & Steen, 1992), and for the study of the macrosocial processes of interaction related to this body of discourse between groups of people inside and outside of institutions (e.g., Griswold, 1996). An approach to literary discourse genres that is not limit-

ed to literature would be useful in increasing the theoretical and empirical appeal of the results of empirical studies of literature.

The criterion for developing such a taxonomy should be a pragmatic or behavioral one: What we are interested in is how literary and nonliterary discourse are used by discourse participants in their various possible roles. This means that we need an individual's perspective on the classification of discourse, for it is the individual who engages the linguistic object as a product or stimulus of a particular kind, it is the individual who performs the mental processes of production and comprehension in relation to the discourse as a particular kind, and it is the individual who thereby participates in the more encompassing social processes of communicative interaction by means of the particular type of discourse in question. This assumption motivates adopting a cognitive psychological approach to discourse classification in the form of prototypical categorization theory (e.g., Paltridge, 1995).

Whether classes of discourse are regarded as natural or social kinds, they cannot be regarded as so-called definitional concepts, which permit description by means of necessary and sufficient conditions. Instead, it is plausible to assume that they are cognitively represented by means of prototypes. As is well known, a prototype is the most typical instance of a more encompassing and varied, fuzzy conceptual category. An example would be an apple as the prototype of a fruit. Such categories themselves can be ordered into three-tiered hierarchies of basic level concepts, subordinates, and superordinates (*apples*, *Golden Delicious*, and *fruit*, respectively). The basic level concepts embody the information level at which concepts are most easily recognized, remembered, and learned; the difference between alternative concepts is largest at this level of abstraction, whereas subordinate and superordinate concepts are less richly differentiated from their respective alternatives (e.g., the subordinates *Golden Delicious* vs. *Granny Smith*). Although the fuzzy and hierarchical aspects of prototypes may be seen as independent of each other, it is their combination that is essential for the development of this proposal (cf. Smith, 1988).

It should be noted that basic level prototypicality is affected by expertise, suggesting that the organization of resemblances and differences between categories is related to their function in use. Before we apply these notions to the development of a taxonomy of discourse, we should hence be explicit about our target of research: A generally valid taxonomy of discourse should not project our expert scientific view of discourse types onto the range of discourse but instead begin with an examination of discourse concepts as they are valid for ordinary language users. It is true that there may be a great degree of social and cultural variability in such knowledge, and some may feel this constitutes a threat to the very notion of literature itself. However, this only means that we just have to be more careful and specific in our use of genre concepts and related notions such as literature. It is an empirical question whether socially and culturally distinct concepts of discourse have sufficient overlap to be useful across cultural and linguistic commu-

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nities. Apart from that, texts, including literary texts, are received and produced by concrete individuals with specific knowledge bases that need to be described (and, hopefully, explained). What is lacking for such an enterprise is a sufficiently sophisticated approach to the many complexities of discourse. It is the purpose of this article to make a very modest beginning with filling that theoretical gap; the empirical research that is needed to investigate these ideas may be illustrated by Fishelov (1995, 1998).

Given these assumptions, it is presumably the level of genre that embodies the basic level concepts, whereas subgenres are the conceptual subordinates, and more abstract classes of discourse are the superordinates. Thus, the genre of an advertisement is to be contrasted with that of a sermon, a recipe, a poem, and so on. These genres differ from each other on a whole range of attributes, to which we will return in a moment. The subordinates of the genre of the advertisement are less distinct from each other. The press advertisement, the radio commercial, the television commercial, the Internet advertisement, and so on, are mainly distinguished by one feature: their medium. The superordinate of the genre of the advertisement, advertising, is also systematically distinct from the other superordinates by means of only one principal attribute, the one of domain: It is "business" for advertising, but it exhibits the respective values of "religious," "domestic," and "artistic" for the other examples. There is an intuitive attraction, then, in adopting the prototype categorization framework as a starting point for the development of a more precise taxonomy of discourse.

This is especially so because fuzzy categories may be characterized by a number of attributes exhibiting different values. Thus, *fruit*, *apples*, and *Golden Delicious* are all characterized by their values regarding color, shape, size, taste, texture, and juiciness. The same holds true for classes of discourse at various levels of abstraction: They have values for at least the attributes of domain, medium, content, form, function, type, and language. Paltridge (1995) has a comparable list. Thus, an advertisement may be characterized as follows: Its domain is the one of business communication. Its medium may vary between written, spoken, and multimodal but typically involves a monologic discourse directed at a large and anonymous, if often well-specified, audience. Its content is almost free, except that it has to have a positive connotation. The form of an advertisement is extremely free; its function is to persuade the consumer that the product or service is good and often to exhort the consumer to go and get it. The discourse type of an advertisement may be either narrative or argumentative, descriptive or expository—each of these types seems equally possible. Its language is an odd mixture of formal and colloquial, usually fairly rhetorically structured, and includes professional register depending on the good advertised (cf. Cook, 1992).

It has to be emphasized here that this is a provisional characterization of a fuzzy category. It is possible to argue about almost all of the features listed previously, even though some seem to be more secure than others. It is certainly true that many advertisements do not exhibit all of the aforementioned characteristics.

For instance, as one reviewer pointed out to me, there are negative attack ads, particularly in political campaigns. However, that is precisely the advantage of adopting a prototypical approach to genre classification: It allows for fuzziness within a multidimensional discourse space. Moreover, the provisional characterization can be tested and corrected, both against informants' judgments about genre concepts as well as against informants' ratings of sets of texts.

This list of attributes may not be complete, but it captures a good deal of the variation between classes of discourse that has been examined in various disciplines contributing to discourse studies. Space forbids ample reference to research performed in each of these areas, but more general descriptions may perhaps suffice to indicate the kinds of work that can be invoked here. The easiest attribute is the one of language, in which stylistics, rhetoric, and sociolinguistics have traditionally been concerned with the study of diverging patterns of selection and combination of language items. Types of discourse are the major classes of narrative, argumentation, description, and exposition recognized of old, some of which have received extensive treatment in disciplines of their own (narratology and argumentation theory), whereas another subset, exposition, has become of increasing interest to discourse psychologists. Functions of discourse include central phenomena such as informative, persuasive, and instructive intentions, which have been studied in cognitive and social psychology and education. By forms of discourse are meant generic superstructures in the sense of van Dijk (1995; for the news report, the scientific article, and so on), but there are also more generally used text patterns such as the problem-solution structure—rhetoricians have traditionally had a large stake in this field. Contents of discourse refers to more or less controversial topics and themes studied in, for instance, critical approaches to discourse, such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, and so on. The medium of discourse involves linguistic and nonlinguistic aspects of the material means by which a message is transmitted, and it has been studied by linguists, semioticians, and mass media scholars. Finally, domains of discourse involve the concept of large-scale social and cultural organizations of reality into spheres of communication with rules, norms, and conventions of their own, such as art, science, religion, business, politics, government, and so on; this aspect of discourse has been predominantly investigated by sociologists of language, mass communication, and culture. All of these aspects have been studied both within and between genres as they have been conceived previously, testifying to their applicability as attributes of discourse at various levels of abstraction (e.g., van Dijk, 1997).

This is a tantalizing sketch that raises more questions than it can answer at the moment. For instance, there is the matter of the number and nature of the attributes and their values. Moreover, some attributes have more variables—should they be seen as distinct attributes themselves? Another question involves the interrelations between the attributes. Then there is the problem of deciding which class of discourse is to be taken as a genre and which is not. These are just three issues that are on the agenda for further research into a taxonomy of discourse.

For now, we have to leave the general approach for what it is and attempt to show how it can be profitably used for the definition of literature.

## THE DEFINITION OF LITERATURE

There is a major advantage in adopting a prototypical categorization approach to the classification of discourse in connection with the empirical study of literature. This is the highlighting of the conceptual connection between distinct genres on the one hand and literature and its definition on the other. Following the approach outlined previously, literature may be argued to be the superordinate of genres such as the novel, the poem, and the play, each of which displays a number of familiar subgenres, such as the western, the detective, and so on, for the novel. It would follow that it might be harder to define the category of literature than the categories of novel, poem, or play, and this might accord with the experience of both ordinary language users as well as experts. An empirical study of literature that wishes to be in touch with other studies of discourse could do worse than explore the consequences of this ordering of the field. This is particularly useful because it redresses situations in which genre studies are pursued without much reference to the definition of literature, and vice versa.

Before we turn to such consequences, let us first examine some of the assumptions of this approach. The basic idea would be that the series of concepts *literature*, *novel*, and *western* is a hierarchy of concepts, of which the *novel* would be the basic level term, *literature* the superordinate, and *western* the subordinate. Language users would, hence, be predicted to have relatively richer representations of novels than of westerns or of literature, when these are compared to competing concepts at the same level, respectively, such as poems on the basic level, spy novels on the subordinate, and philosophy on the superordinate. To pursue this example somewhat further, a novel might be characterized as follows: Its content would be fictional and portray a significant action or process. Its form could be one of suspense, surprise, or curiosity (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). Its type would be narrative in that semantically causal relations would somehow govern the text structure (e.g., van den Broek, 1994). Its function would be to positively affect the mood of the reader. Its medium would be printed matter for a mass readership. Its domain would be the one of the arts. Its language could be characterized, with Biber (1989), as "extremely narrative, moderately involved, situated, nonabstract, and not marked for persuasion" (p. 18). This is a rich and typical description of the concept of the novel, which should be easily recognizable to the ordinary language user. Again, however, it is probably wise to add a warning that we are talking about a prototype that may, moreover, be socially and culturally variable: As we have seen previously, such a caveat only suggests that there is a lot of empirical work to be done.

The novel may be fruitfully opposed to the poem. The content of a poem would also typically be fictional but would not be restricted to portraying a significant

action or process. The form of a poem could be highly diverse, from the haiku and the epigram, through the sonnet and free verse, to the epic. Its type could be narrative but just as easily argumentative, descriptive, and expository. Its function would also be to positively affect the mood of the reader. Its medium could be printed matter for a mass readership, just like the novel, but oral poetry and poetry to music are just as common, so the medium does not seem to be fixed. Its domain would be the one of the arts, again, but its language should be characterized as relatively foregrounded in comparison with the novel (cf. Fishelov, 1998). In sum, function and domain would not be different between novel and poem, but form, type, medium, and language would be different. Content is both different and identical between the two in that fiction is an important shared characteristic.

This may lead to a description of the superordinate concept in these terms: Literature is a type of discourse that is characterized by the domain value "artistic," the content value "fictional," and the functional value "positively affective," or simply "divertive." Contrast this to the nature of the superordinate of *advertising* mentioned before, and it is clear that it, too, is mainly determined by the two attributes of domain and function, having the values of "business" and "persuasive," respectively; medium, form, type, and language are all unspecified for these two superordinates. In other words, the superordinates *literature* and *advertising* are positively distinguished from each other by means of two properties, whereas the basic level concepts *novel* and *poem* require five attributes for a correct discrimination between them. This is in support of the argument for the adoption of the prototype approach and its use of genres as basic level concepts.

One of the most striking and, at first glance, questionable features in this description of literature might be the one of "positively affective," or simply "divertive." Tragedy is a class of literature that seems in blatant contradiction with this value and raises the following question: How can it be accommodated? However, tragedy mainly has to do with the content of the literary text in that it deals with a negatively valenced story. It is one of the complex characteristics of literature that the reader may turn to sad stories to experience pleasure: The famous American critic Leslie Fiedler held that all literature is meant to water the emotions. In such cases, there is a clash between content and function that is typical of many texts belonging to this artistic domain. That negative mood triggered by negatively valenced content may be dominant during some stages of the reading process does not mean that the overall function of the text cannot be said to be divertive at the end of the day. According to Czech Structuralism, literature is typically characterized by experiencing pleasure in displeasure.

Let us turn to subordinate concepts. As has been pointed out by Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982), the thriller and the detective are kinds of novels that only differ from each other with respect to form, in that the causal structure of the events described is portrayed in a typically different order or form; in the terminology of prototypical categorization theory, they require only one attribute for their distinction. In poetry, elegies and odes exhibit no other constant difference than the

one of content, which is positively or negatively valenced. A similar opposition may be observed between comedies and tragedies in plays. Hence, subordinates are also less richly differentiated from each other than are basic level concepts.

All of these comments are crude simplifications when it comes to examining individual instances of beautiful texts prized by the literary scholar, and many important aspects of literary comprehension have been omitted. But this is precisely why the theory of genres and the definition of literature have been problematic for so long. This proposal is not intended to be the answer to all of these problems; on the contrary, it is merely the beginning of a research program that requires a great deal of support from the expertise residing in traditional literary scholarship and its experience with individual texts. However, it also offers a framework for mobilizing and revealing that expertise in empirical work by pointing to the possibility of data collection on properties of classes of discourse in the manner of prototype categorization theory. That the definition of literature should be directly geared to people's experience of concrete genres and subgenres is a novel perspective on this issue, which may help explain why the category of literature itself is such an elusive category. This may not be due to the nature of literature itself but to the abstract nature of superordinates and our conceptualization of them as fuzzy categories. The approach, thus, ultimately aims to ground the distinctness of central literary genres and the specificity of the literary reading experience in the individual's conceptual repertoire, leaving ample scope for the role of representation by means of exemplars in a fashion that might be highly attractive to the traditional scholar. Moreover, the framework also guarantees that we link up with other instances of discourse processes outside literature, enhancing our understanding of constancies and variation between literary and nonliterary classes of discourse. To further strengthen the appeal of this proposal, let us finally take a brief look at some alternatives and explain what is wrong with them.

### SOME OTHER PROPOSALS

A prototypical approach emphasizes the hierarchical order of fuzzy concepts in a domain, using the same attributes for every level of conceptualization. From that perspective, there is a direct relation between genres of literary discourse and the definition of literature itself. They are all classes of discourse, with different numbers of typical values for the possible attributes at each level of abstraction. Let us examine how this starting point can explain the problems of some recent proposals.

Brewer (1995) advanced an interesting theoretical contribution on "Discourse Force and Empirical Studies of Literature." His concern was with the classification of genres, literary and nonliterary, according to "type of information" and "discourse force." The latter would be identical to our factor of function, whereas the former is a conflation of our factors of content and type. In addition to these factors, Brewer distinguished another factor, "text structure," which is our factor

of "form." Brewer situated some 20-odd genres within his two-dimensional grid of Information Type  $\times$  Discourse Force and points out some relations between particular combinations of values on the one hand and "text structures" on the other. There is a good number of details that would merit further discussion, but in this context, only one issue may receive extended treatment.

The dimension of discourse force has four values in Brewer's (1995) proposal: informative, entertaining, persuasive, and literary-aesthetic. If the basis of discourse force or function is the presumed effect of the text on the reader, "literary-aesthetic" is the odd one out: Texts can aim to entertain, inform, and persuade readers (and instruct, exhort, and direct them), but they cannot "literary-aesthetic" readers. They may have an aesthetic affect, but that is just one kind of affect, a specific form of "entertaining." The literary part of "literary-aesthetic" is either the same, or it is not a function but an indication of the domain of the text—that it is artistic. In that case, which is the interpretation I prefer, Brewer's taxonomy would require another dimension—the one of domain—which could have values such as "artistic," "scientific," "business," and so on. Treating literature as part of a domain of discourse is what sociologically oriented literary theorists have done for a while now, although few people would hazard to regard literature as a function.

As an aside, it should be noted that this does not mean that literature does not have a function, which, in some cases, may be to defamiliarize the reader's perceptions. Indeed, defamiliarization may be seen as one specific effect of the divertive discourse function, as was also suggested by the Czech Structuralists, and it can be traced by conducting empirical work of the kind referred to at the outset of this article. However, the point is that literature cannot be solely defined as a function, conceptualized as the expressive, divertive, informative, persuasive, and other presumed effects of a text on the reader. It is precisely the multidimensional nature of a prototypical approach to discourse genres that aims to accommodate the complex, multifaceted nature of literature, including features such as function and domain, besides some other ones.

The oddity of Brewer's (1995) proposal can be explained by connecting it to a taxonomy of more abstract classes of discourse, as is a natural thing to do in a prototype-theoretical approach. Just as genres such as poems and novels have values for attributes such as discourse force and so on, so do their superordinates, including literature. As a result, "literary" cannot come up as one value of the attribute of "discourse force" or "function" for the basic level concepts of the various concrete genres, for it is not a property of discourse but a superordinate category of discourse in itself. What we see happening in Brewer is the transformation of a superordinate concept (*literature*) into a value (*literary*) of an attribute (*function*) for the basic level categories (*concrete genres*). A more comprehensive prototypical approach with its emphasis on hierarchical ordering next to prototypical ordering highlights the need for the inclusion of literature as a defined, more abstract class of discourse.

If Brewer (1995) exemplified what happens when genres are discussed without due attention being paid to superordinates, the reverse may be observed in

some of the work by the sociological approach to literature referred to just now. Such approaches sometimes deal with literature as a superordinate class of discourse without having sufficient recourse to the basic level terms of concrete genres out of which the superordinate arises. Literature is often regarded as a cultural domain governed by a set of conventions for social action, perhaps in connection with the typical function of achieving some kind of positive affect (Schmidt, 1982; cf. van Peer, 1991). This is an abstract definition of literature that is not very rich in itself, as is to be expected at the level of superordinates. What should not be forgotten, however, is the fact that such superordinates and their prototypical properties function in a larger conceptual system, in which it is the basic level terms that provide more meat to the entire domain. As we have seen, we know a lot about typical literary genres such as the poem and the novel, but the variation between them is too large to be uniformly reflected in the definition of their superordinate category, literature itself.

The problem in some of the more radical approaches to literature as a social domain, however, is that this basic level experience of literature is left aside. As a result, the impression may arise that concrete properties of texts with regard to language, medium, form, content, and type are immaterial when we speak about literature, leading to the conclusion that anything may be literature. To a certain extent this is true, but it also goes against our typical experience of literature through its basic level genres. The only explanation of this paradox is to adopt a prototypical and encompassing approach to the genres and definition of literature. It shows that almost any text as an instance of a specific genre may be dealt with as if it were literature, but it also shows that many such texts would be experienced as atypical examples of literature, which are far removed from what we would expect for the genre in question.

A final note may be in order about other superordinates, such as fiction and narrative. Fiction and narrative are two interesting and important superordinates that arise out of the grouping of texts according to values of attributes other than the one of domain. Fiction is one value of the attribute of content, whereas narrative is one value of the attribute of type. One observation that may be made is that some of these superordinates are more functional than others: Literature and its alternatives—academic writing, journalism, and so on—are probably more generally recognizable as superordinate classes of discourse than are fiction and narrative. Apparently, the domain factor is more important than the ones of content and type. Why is this? Moreover, fiction is beginning to be used as a functional label in bookshops, libraries, and review articles as well (Fishelov, 1995), but narrative is not. Why should this be? Yet Graesser and Kreuz (1993) used narrative as one of their four main factors in an inference generation model. Is this justifiable? It raises questions as to the weight of this particular superordinate in comparison with other conceivable ones, either derived from the same attribute (like argumentation), or from other attributes (like fiction for content, and so on). A prototypical approach to a taxonomy of discourse may be a good conceptual in-

strument to motivate the use of such abstract, superordinate categories of discourse in all kinds of studies, including studies of literary discourse.

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