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Applied genre analysis: a multi-perspective model

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Abstract

Genre analysis can be viewed from two different perspectives: it may be seen as a reflection of the complex realities of the world of institutionalised communication, or it may be seen as a pedagogically effective and convenient tool for the design of language teaching programmes, often situated within simulated contexts of classroom activities. This paper makes an attempt to understand and resolve the tension between these two seemingly contentious perspectives to answer the question: "Is generic description a reflection of reality, or a convenient fiction invented by applied linguists?". The paper also discusses issues related to the nature and use of linguistic description in a genre-based educational enterprise, claiming that instead of using generic descriptions as models for linguistic reproduction of conventional forms to respond to recurring social contexts, as is often the case in many communication based curriculum contexts, they can be used as analytical resource to understand and manipulate complex inter-generic and multicultural realisations of professional discourse, which will enable learners to use generic knowledge to respond to novel social contexts and also to create new forms of discourse to achieve pragmatic success as well as other powerful human agendas.

Key Words: Genre analysis, generic knowledge, professional discourse, educational settings

Resumen

Se puede considerar al análisis de género desde dos perspectivas distintas; como reflejo de las realidades complejas del mundo de la comunicación institucionalizada o como una herramienta pedagógicamente efectiva y útil para el diseño de programas de enseñanza de lenguas, a menudo situado dentro de los contextos simulados de la interacción en el aula. Este artículo pretende entender y resolver la tensión entre estas dos perspectivas aparentemente enfrentadas para

contestar a la cuestión "¿es la descripción genérica un reflejo de la realidad o una ficción conveniente inventada por las especialistas en lingüística aplicada?". Este artículo también considera aspectos relacionados con la naturaleza y uso de la descripción lingüística en una iniciativa educativa basada en el género; argumentando que, en lugar de utilizar la descripción genérica como modelo para la reproducción lingüística de formas convencionales para responder a contextos sociales recurrentes, como tan a menudo ocurre en muchos contextos curriculares basados en la comunicación, se puede utilizar como un recurso analítico para entender y manipular realizaciones complejas inter-genéricas y multiculturales del discurso profesional, que permitirá a los estudiantes utilizar conocimiento genérico para responder a contextos sociales nuevos y también crear nuevas formas de discurso para alcanzar tanto el éxito pragmático como otros agendas humanas poderosas.

Palabras Clave: análisis de género, conocimiento genérico, discurso profesional, contextos educativos

Genre analysis has always been a multi-disciplinary activity attracting attention not only from linguists (both applied and computational), discourse analysts, communication experts and rhetoricians, but also from sociologists, cognitive scientists, translators, advertisers, and plain English campaigners, to name only a few. In recent years, it has become multi-faceted too, often prompting varied perspectives on analysing genre. One often wonders whether there are any common elements in these perspectives, whether in terms of theoretical paradigms, methodological frameworks or spheres of application. Although, some of these variations in genre theory may be the result of a continual quest for thicker descriptions of language use, there may also be other factors encouraging different frameworks.

Long term investment in and affiliation to different linguistic frameworks and to some extent geographical distances have encouraged people to define and pursue generic research to somewhat differing conclusions. Oftentimes, such a variation in approaches has also been prompted by different motivations for the analysis: a specific application of findings, a more socio-critical look at what people do with language, or a theoretical issue or focus. In whatever way one may define it, either as *typification of social and rhetorical action*, as in Miller (1984), and Berkenkotter & Huckin (1995), as *regularities of staged, goal oriented social processes* as in Martin (1993), or as *consistency of communicative purposes*, Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), genre analysis is often viewed as the study of situated linguistic behaviour.

Although much of the work on genre analysis has been primarily motivated by applied linguistic concerns, in this paper, I would like to go beyond such concerns in an attempt to extend the scope of genre theory, on the one hand, and also to redefine the conventional boundaries of applied linguistics, on the other. I would also like to emphasise that whatever the focus of generic research may be, it cannot afford to undermine the complex and dynamic realities of the world of discourse. It is often more convenient to focus on a narrow application, in particular, on the search for generic descriptions suitable for the language classroom, where it can be used either as a model or a resource. As a model, a generic description is used as a representative, typical, or ideal example of a generic construct as input for learners to analyse, understand and to exploit in their writing to innovate and respond to novel situations. As a resource, the focus shifts from the textual description as a model to the knowledge of procedures, practices, and conventions that make the text possible and relevant to a particular socio-rhetorical context. This knowledge might be seen in terms of a 'generic potential' to extend Halliday's (1975) use of the term, which enables one to make appropriate decisions as to the choice of lexico-grammatical as well as generic resources to respond to familiar and not so familiar rhetorical situations. However legitimate and strong the need for a narrow focus on applications to language learning and teaching might be, it is always important to have a broader vision to capture the social and institutional realities of the every day world. The main goals of genre theory therefore are

- to represent and account for the seemingly chaotic realities of the world;
- to understand and account for the private intentions of the author, in addition to socially recognised communicative purposes;
- to understand how language is used in and shaped by socio-critical environment; and,
- to offer effective solutions to pedagogical and other applied linguistic problems.

In doing so, I will be making an attempt to discuss two of the most recurring myths of recent times about the use of genre theory in language pedagogy, which are as follows:

- a) Genre theory encourages simple reproductions of discourse forms, and hence represents a rather simplified view of the world.
- b) Genre-based descriptions are static and hence their pedagogical and other applied linguistic applications discourage understanding and use of creativity and transfer of skills across other discourse forms.

To begin with, I would like to emphasise that although genre analysis is seen as applied in concern, and as such puts a heavy premium on conventional use of language, it is versatile and dynamic in nature, essentially explanatory rather than purely descriptive, narrow in focus, but broad in vision, and has a natural propensity for innovation and exploitation.

Finally, I hope to raise the most important question in applied genre analysis, that is, "Is generic description a reflection of reality or a convenient fiction invented by applied linguists for pedagogical and other purposes?"

Without attempting to offer any new definition of genre analysis, I would like to point out that analysing genre means investigating instances of conventionalised or institutionalised textual artefacts in the context of specific institutional and disciplinary practices, procedures and cultures in order to understand how members of specific discourse communities construct, interpret and use these genres to achieve their community goals and why they write them the way they do.

To me there are four contributors to this view of language use (Bhatia, 1999a):

Purposes:	Institutionalised community goals and communicative purposes
Products:	Textual artefacts or genres
Practices:	Discursive practices, procedures and processes
Players:	Discourse community membership

Although in principle, we may have our preferred ways of beginning with either the textual data or the discourse community or their practices depending upon the framework within which we work, in actual practice, the important consideration is how and to what extent we integrate these four elements. A complete devotion to the analysis of textual data may give us an excellent linguistic description of the text in question; however, such a description is unlikely to reveal as to how or why the text has been textualised the way it is. Similarly, an undivided attention to the communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) may unravel many of the mysteries of the way members of various discourse communities function to achieve their institutional and disciplinary goals and to justify their discursive practices, and may even raise socio-critical and cultural issues in the context of typical institutional practices; however it is very unlikely that it will have much to contribute to a significant

investigation and understanding of textualisation processes of the genre in question. Likewise, it will be futile to focus on practices without integrating them to institutional and community goals and communicative purposes, or to study communicative purposes and textual products without relating them to the discursive practices of the community members and their individual concerns. Therefore, it seems more than necessary to posit a framework which integrates these four aspects of genre theory in an interactive and integrative manner to get as complete and comprehensive account and understanding of the genre as is possible, keeping always in mind the ultimate aim of the investigation.

One of the main objectives of genre analysis, therefore, is to understand and to account for the realities of the world of texts. The real world is not only complex but dynamic too; complex in the sense that it incorporates texts of various kinds, serving often overlapping and at the same time, conflicting communicative purposes. Recent genre literature will convince us of the complexities involved in the generic view of language, some of which one may find reflected in the following seven perceptions.

1. Although genres are identified on the basis of conventionalised features, yet we know they are constantly developing (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995).
2. We often find typical textualisation patterns, yet we know expert members of professional communities exploit them to create novel patterns (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995).
3. We know that genres serve typical socially recognised communicative purposes, yet we often find genres being exploited to convey private intentions (Bhatia, 1993, 1995).
4. We all manage to identify individual generic artefacts, yet in the real world they are often seen in hybrid, mixed and embedded forms (Fairclough, 1993; Bhatia, 1997a, 1997b).
5. Genres are given typical names; yet different members of discourse communities have varying perspectives on and interpretations of them, which sometimes are contested (Candlin & Plum, 1999b; Bhatia, 1999b).

6. We believe that genres are independent of disciplinary variation, yet we often find disciplinary conflicts in many of them, especially in academic genres (Bhatia, 1998b, 1999b).
7. We often associate genre analysis with a typical textual investigation, yet we find good analyses using a variety of methods, including textual analyses, ethnographic techniques, cognitive procedures, computational rigour and critical awareness, to name only a few.

In order to have a more systematic view of genre theory and its application, I would like to suggest that we consider four different and yet interacting perspectives on discourse, each of which seems to offer a different view of the world, as it were. To my mind, one needs to come to terms with four different kinds of worlds, if I may use the term to refer to different perspectives on what I may call the universe of discourse. These are:

- The real world perspective
- The writer's socio-cognitive perspective
- The discourse analyst's perspective
- The pedagogical perspective

[A] The real world perspective

The real world of discourse may seem chaotic, because it is complex, dynamic and fluid, in the sense it is constantly developing. To me it is somewhat similar to what we see at night as the chaotic and yet systematic patterns in the galaxy. Like the stars in the galaxy, the genres exist in colonies (Bhatia, 1995, 1997a), and then colonies have systematic relationship with each other as one may find in the whole galaxy of the universe. The complexity, however, is due to several factors, some of which I would like to list here.

• Register variation

The concept of register goes back to Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964), who popularised the term by defining it in terms of the contextual factors of Field, Mode and Tenor of Discourse to identify different uses of language. Typical examples include,

- Scientific register
- Legal register

Journalese

Medical register, and many more...

• **Disciplinary Variation**

Strong boundaries defining membership and initiation, variations in knowledge structures and norms of inquiry, different vocabularies and discourses, differing standards for rhetorical intimacy and modes of expression and distinctions in typical approaches to teaching often define discourses along disciplinary boundaries. Demarcations between broad subject areas thus appear to not only reflect differences in the structure of knowledge systems, but also often embody quite different assumptions about discourse and communication (Bhatia, 1999a; Hyland, 2000; Myers, 1995). These differences influence both the preferred modes of communication among disciplines and the rhetorical characteristics of the genres students are expected to assimilate in becoming competent members of a discourse community (Bhatia, 1999b; Bhatia and Candlin, 2001). Specific parameters along which we distinguish such a variation and some striking instances of such distinctions include:

Theory and application

Formal Linguistics	v.	Applied Linguists
Mathematics	v.	Applied Mathematics
Economics	v.	Marketing

Interdisciplinarity in academic programmes

Law	v.	Business
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Modes of thinking and research

Economics	v.	Accounting
Philosophy	v.	Psychology

• **Generic systems within professional communities**

It may also be characterised by a set of genre systems (Bazerman, 1993, 1994) practised by members of a particular discourse community to communicate with a larger set of people outside the community, one of which generally is ordinary public and the other(s) may be discourse communities other than those to which they belong. Such readership(s) may be from one or several discourse domains.

System of genres in Law: cases, judgements, ordinances, contracts, agreements etc.

System of genres in Business: memos, reports, case studies, letters,

System of genres in public administration: government documents, political communication, news reports, policy statements, international treaties, memoranda of understanding, etc.

System of genres in mass media: editorials, News reports, review articles, advertisements, sports reports, letters to the editor, etc.

• **Colonies of Genres**

We often find a constellation of closely related and overlapping genres, sometimes within but often across discourse communities, some of which may include,

Promotional genres

Reporting genres

Introductory genres

Academic genres

Letter genres

Textbook genres

E-mail genres

• **Mixed and embedded genres**

Although in much of genre analysis, we identify textual artefacts in terms of pure genres, in practice, we often find them in mixed or embedded forms, either because they are designed to achieve a mix of communicative purposes, (often complimentary, though conflicting are also possible, some of which I shall take up in the next section), or to communicate 'private intentions' within the context of 'socially recognised communicative purposes' (see Bhatia, 1995, 1997a, Fairclough, 1995, for details). Some of these include,

Annual reports, which often convey not only the annual performance of the company or corporation but also in a very subtle manner incorporate promotional elements, one of which is a typical selection and interpretation of positive aspects of the performance figures.

Corporate brochures, though designed to be informative, are becoming increasingly promotional in character and tone.

Reviews, though less in the case of books and films, but more so in the case of food, restaurants, computer products, especially software are becoming more promotional than balanced evaluation of products and services.

In the case of some others, there is an explicit attempt to mix two genres, such as *infotainment*, *advertorials*, and *advertorial features*, and many others.

- **Cross-cultural Variation**

And, finally we find intercultural variations in generic realisations, especially in the use of lexico-grammatical and discourse organisational patterns.

[B] The socio-cognitive perspective

Genres are also notorious for encouraging expert genre writers to appropriate rhetorical resources and other generic conventions across genres. This kind of appropriation of generic resources is best seen in areas of discourse in which promotional concerns are often incorporated, especially in those that have been traditionally non-promotional or informational. Primary forms of promotional genres have often been regarded as advertisements, and sales promotion letters. However, we do find a number of appropriated and mixed forms such as the following.

- **Cross-cultural Variation**

Applications (for) jobs, scholarships, etc

Recommendation letters: testimonials, reference letters etc

Appeals: fundraising letters and brochures

Proposals: grant proposals, project proposals

Public Documents such as consultation documents, green papers, white papers,

- **Mixed forms**

Mixed or hybrid forms often serve a mixture of two or more communicative purposes through the same generic form. Typical instances include the following:

Political Documents such as manifestos, mission statements, press communiqués, Joint declarations, memoranda of understanding, etc

Brochures such as company brochures, investment brochures, travel brochures

Leaflets often used by financial institutions, banks, health organisations, hospitals, travel corporations and companies, and government departments

Introductions such as book introductions, prefaces, forewords, blurbs, and occasionally research article introductions etc.

With the invasion of new media and electronic modes of communication in public life, on the one hand, and the more recent increase in the interdisciplinary nature of academic and professional discourse, appropriation of lexico-grammatical resources and discursive strategies across discourse communities and genres is becoming increasingly common. Fairclough (1993, 1995) and Bhatia (1993, 1995, and 1997a, 1997b) give extensive coverage to this aspect of discourse manipulation by expert members of professional communities. Some of the prominent examples they discuss are the following.

- Fundraising discourse (Bhatia, 1998a)
- Academic job and course advertisements (Fairclough, 1993)
- Academic course descriptions (Fairclough, 1995)
- Book introductions and book blurbs (Bhatia, 1997a)
- Memoranda of understanding (Bhatia, 2000)
- Joint declarations (Bhatia, 2000)

In addition, we also find interesting instances of genre bending to achieve private intentions within socially recognised communicative purposes, where expert genre writers implicitly express private intentions within the context of socially recognised communicative purpose, as in 'some forms of elaborate questions in conferences and seminars', 'stance in news reporting', 'summarising others' contribution in meetings' (Fairclough, 1992), or specific forms of 'organisational variations'. Contrary to popular perceptions about conformity of generic constructions, one may often find in them a remarkable degree of creativity and innovation.

[C] The analytical perspective

Analysis of discourse as genre often incorporates the use of a range of research methods, some of which are of relatively recent origin in the context of discourse and genre studies. Within each method, the analyst also has a number of rather different frameworks to choose from. Let me mention some of the more prominent ones here.

Corpus studies

The computational analysis of language is often able to reveal patterns of form and use in particular genres and areas of language that are unsuspected by the researcher and difficult to perceive in other ways.

Textual analysis

Linguistic descriptions of texts, especially the analysis of lexico-grammatical systems in register analysis, text-linguistics and much of discourse analysis based on systemic-functional framework has been extremely influential in the studies of textualisation of a range of professional and institutionalised genres, including those used at school level.

Critical and ethnographic analysis

Interviews and case studies have become increasingly important means of collecting data in academic and educational contexts, particularly for the investigation of developmental aspects of learner language, learning style preferences and writing practices of expert writers, especially in studying some of the following issues.

How do members of a particular discourse community see their discipline and its forms of communication?

How do they communicate these to novices?

How do their understandings influence their own writing practices?

All these and other similar questions are little researched and understood as part of academic and professional communication.

Swales (1998) work on textography is an excellent example of thick descriptions of texts situated in disciplinary contexts and their typical physical environments.

Genre Studies

Genre studies incorporate a variety of frameworks used to analyse a range of textual genres constructed, interpreted and used by members of various disciplinary communities in academic, professional, workplace and other institutionalised contexts. Genre studies range from a close linguistic study of texts as product, investigation into a dynamic complexity of communicative practices of professional and workplace communities to a broad understanding of socio-cultural and critical procedures used to interpret these textual genres in real life settings. Understanding the nature of discursive practices of various disciplinary cultures which often give shape to these communicative processes and textual genres is yet another aspect of genre-based investigations. Awareness and understanding of genre knowledge is yet another crucial factor in the understanding of genre-based analysis, which may be understood as situated cognition related to the discursive practices of members of disciplinary cultures. The co-operation and collaboration of such specialists provide an important corrective to purely text-based approaches.

[D] The pedagogical perspective

Pedagogical practices and procedures, often used to sensitise and prepare students to meet the communicative demands of disciplinary communication, provide necessary understanding of the concerns that determine the nature of discourse and genre analyses. Insights from such analyses of pedagogical practices and procedures, especially in the contexts of analyses of tasks and materials make analytical findings relevant to specific contexts of application, on the one hand, and help integrate analytical findings with language learning procedures, on the other. This perspective also helps to sensitise content lecturers to the communication demands imposed on their students. Some of the important issues that have been raised in this context are the following.

- Managing disciplinary conflicts (Bhatia, 1998b, 1999b)
- Raising of rhetorical and genre consciousness (Swales, 1993)
- Providing tactical space
- Integrating process, product, purposes and participants in genre construction (Bhatia, 1999b)
- Ownership of genres (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995)
- Legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991)
- Transfer of genre-based skills (from one genre to another)

Rationale for communicative behaviour (in discourse community & professional settings)

Applied linguistic issues

From the above we can perceive we can perceive a number of issues leading to tensions in these interacting and overlapping issues, some of which include,

Social and individual constructions of discourse, which leads to a tension between the socially constructed discourse forms and the private intentions of those who have the ability and the socially assigned power to exploit such social constructions to achieve private ends. This also reflects the tension between generic integrity and generic innovation.

Real and pedagogic worlds, which, to a large extent raises the question, "To what extent should pedagogical practices reflect or account for the realities of the world of discourse?" (Bhatia, 1999c)

And, finally, there is the question of reconciliation between

Real and analytical worlds, which raises the question "to what extent should the analytical procedures account for the full realities of the world of discourse?" Or in other words, "to what extent, it is necessary or even desirable to see the whole of the elephant?"

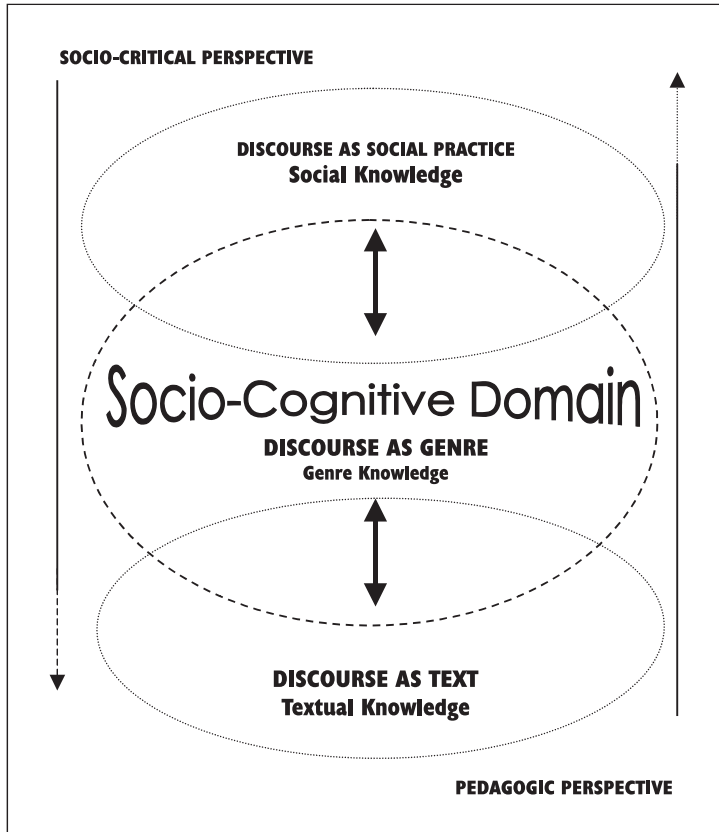
I must admit that I have barely managed to scratch the surface in raising some of the interesting issues in applied genre analysis. But I am sure that some of these have been and will continue to be of central concern to the community of applied linguists and to the members of this discourse community. However, I would like to attempt a rather simplified solution to at least one of the major tensions, which I think is of primary interest to most of us, which I can sum up in the following question:

Is generic description a reflection of reality?

Or

Is it a convenient fiction invented by the teacher?

In order to provide an insightful answer to the question raised here, I would like to propose an overlapping model of genre analysis, which will reflect the three perspectives (Bhatia, 1999c) discussed above. This can be visually represented as follows.



Perspectives on discourse

The three perspectives outlined above form the basis of the proposed theoretical applied genre analytical model, and represent the three perspectives mentioned here: the textual perspective, the socio-cognitive perspective (the world of private intentions, i.e., exploitations of discourse by individual players), and the socio-critical perspective.

Discourse as text refers to the analysis of language use that is confined to the surface level properties of discourse, which include formal, as well as functional aspects of discourse, that is phonological, lexico-grammatical, semantic, organisational, including intersentential cohesion, and other aspects of text structure such as 'given' and 'new', 'theme' and 'rheme', or information structures, such as 'general-particular', problem-solution, etc., not necessarily having interaction with context in a broad sense. Although discourse is essentially embedded in context, *discourse as text* often excludes any significant analysis of context in any meaningful way, except in a very narrow sense of intertextuality to include interactions with surrounding texts. Similarly, the emphasis at this level of analysis is essentially on the properties associated with the construction of the textual product, rather than on the interpretation or use of such a product. It largely ignores the contribution often made by the reader on the basis of what he or she brings to the interpretation of the textual output, especially in terms of the knowledge of the world, including the professional, socio-cultural, and institutional knowledge as well as experience that one is likely to use to interpret, use, and exploit such a discourse.

Discourse as genre, in contrast, extends the analysis beyond the textual output to incorporate *Context* in a broader sense to account for not only the way text is constructed, but also for the way it is likely to be interpreted, used and exploited in specific contexts, whether social, institutional, or more narrowly professional, to achieve specific goals. The nature of questions addressed in this kind of analysis may often include not only linguistic, but also socio-cognitive and ethnographic. This kind of grounded analysis of the textual output is very typical of any framework within genre-based theory.

DISCOURSE

As Social Practice

How is discourse constrained by social practices, identities, and social structures?

Context: Broadly configured in terms of socio-culture realities

Genre

Why do people construct discourse the way we do, and what makes this possible?

Context: More specifically configured in terms of disciplinary cultures

Text

What features of lexicogrammar are statistically and/or functionally distinctive?

Context: Narrowly configured in terms of textual links

Discourse as social practice takes this interaction with the *Context* a step further in the direction of social context, where the focus shifts significantly from the textual output to the features of context, such as the changing identities of the participants, the social structures or professional relationships the genres are likely to maintain or change, the benefits or disadvantages such genres are likely to bring to a particular set of readers. The following diagram summarises the main conclusions.

It is important to note that the three interacting views of discourse are not mutually exclusive, but essentially complementary to each other. It is possible to use the proposed framework in a number of ways, depending upon the objective one may need or decide to pursue. A typical socio-linguist interested in discourse analysis will perhaps begin from the top end, looking deeply and exhaustively into the social context, working his way downward, but rarely getting seriously into the textual space. An applied linguist, on the other hand, would find it more profitable to begin at the bottom end, exploring the textual space exhaustively, working toward social space, often using social context as explanation for the analysis of textualisation of lexico-grammatical and discoursal resources. However, most users of the framework whether interested in socio-cultural issues, or pedagogical ones, at some stage or the other will necessarily pay some attention to the socio-cognitive aspects of genre construction, interpretation, use or exploitation of generic resources.

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