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Critical reflections on genre analysis

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Abstract

Genre Analysis of academic and professional texts has traditionally been the focus of much of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) inspired language descriptions. The emphasis in this form of analysis was, and still continues to be, on the use of text-internal linguistic resources, in particular, on the use of formal and functional properties of language, especially analysis of rhetorical “moves” with relatively limited focus on context or text-external resources, which play an important role in the socio-pragmatics of academic and professional genres. This paper is an attempt to critically reflect on a general overview of this approach to the analysis of professional genres, while at the same, extending the scope of the construction, interpretation and use of professional genres by focusing on the academic and professional “practices” that most academics and professional experts are engaged in as part of their daily routine within what Bhatia (2010) calls “socio-pragmatic space” in which such professional genres invariably function.

Keywords: (critical) genre analysis, interdiscursivity, professional discourse, socio-pragmatic space, text-internal and text-external resources.

Resumen

Reflexiones críticas sobre el análisis de género

Tradicionalmente, los estudios relativos al análisis de textos académicos y profesionales como género han centrado e inspirado las descripciones lingüísticas del área de inglés para fines específicos (IFE). Esta forma de análisis ha hecho hincapié, y lo sigue haciendo, en el uso de recursos lingüísticos textuales internos, y concretamente en el uso de las propiedades formales y funcionales del lenguaje, como el análisis de los “movimientos” retóricos, relativamente limitados al contexto o a los recursos textuales externos, que juegan un papel importante en las características socio-pragmáticas de los géneros académicos y profesionales. El presente trabajo pretende reflexionar de

forma crítica sobre la visión general de este enfoque para el análisis de los géneros profesionales, y al mismo tiempo ampliar el alcance de la construcción, la interpretación y el uso de dichos géneros centrándose en la “práctica” académica y profesional a la que los académicos y profesionales dedican parte de su quehacer diario, dentro de lo que Bhatia (2010) denomina “espacio socio-pragmático” y donde los géneros profesionales funcionan invariablemente.

Palabras clave: análisis (crítico) de géneros, interdiscursividad, discurso profesional, espacio socio-pragmático, inglés para fines específicos, recursos textuales internos y externos.

Prologue

I would like to reflect on my engagement with genre in three main episodes focusing on “genre analysis”, “critical genre analysis” and “interdiscursivity”, although there is also a preliminary episode that begins with my interest in and engagement with legal discourse. So my reflective narrative begins with legal discourse, which was my first interest. In fact, it was my involvement in legal discourse that brought me to genre analysis. Most of my work in law has focused on written discourse, in particular on legislation. What I have seen in the last four decades of my involvement in the analysis of legal genres is that although it is easy to criticize how parliamentary counsels draft legislation, it is very difficult to understand why it is written the way it is. There are issues of transparency, power, control, jurisdiction, and accessibility involved. Much of the literature on plain language law is biased toward an excessive concern for accessibility, often at the cost of other factors. One needs to consider other issues such as who is given the power to interpret the genre and who ultimately will be assigned control over its interpretation, and in what sort of jurisdiction and socio-political context. Once we consider all these issues, we realize that it is best to consider such genres on their own terms rather than imposing any single criterion to judge its construction, use and interpretation. So right from the beginning of my engagement with legal genres the question that has always been on mind, and to some extent it still does, is: “why do these and, for that matter, other professionals write the way they do?” The quest for the answer to this most important question led me to genre theory, as I know it even today. So let me reflect on my involvement and understanding of genre theory, with special emphasis on professional genres.

Episode one: Genre analysis

Ever since the early conceptualisation of genre theory in the United Kingdom in 1980s I have been partly instrumental in developing it from a purely linguistic analysis of academic and professional genres to the analysis of professional practices and disciplinary cultures, thus integrating textual, strategic or socio-pragmatic, and other critical aspects of genre construction, interpretation, use, and exploitation in various professional contexts. What I would like to do in this narrative is to offer purely personal reflections on some of the critical developments in this theory in the last three decades.

My own view of genre, as discussed in my 1993 book on *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings* primarily as an instance of linguistic and rhetorical analysis, has developed into a more comprehensive multi-perspective and multidimensional view of genre analysis in my 2004 book on *Worlds of Written Discourse: A Genre-Based View*. In its early form, genre theory was primarily concerned with the application of genre analysis to develop pedagogical solutions for ESP classrooms. For more than thirty years now it is still considered perhaps the most popular and useful tool to analyse academic and professional genres for ESP applications. Much of the credit for its exceptional achievement goes to the seminal works of Swales (1990 & 2004) and Bhatia (1993) on the development of genre theory to analyse academic and professional genres, with an eye on applications to ESP, especially those used in research, legal, and business contexts.

In my later work (Bhatia, 2004), which was an attempt to develop it further in order to understand the much more complex and dynamic real world of written discourse, my intention was to move away from pedagogic applications to ESP, firstly to focus on the world of professions, and secondly, to be able to see as much of the elephant as possible, as the saying goes, rather than only a part of it like the six blind men. I believe that all frameworks of discourse and genre analysis offer useful insights about specific aspects of language use in typical contexts, but most of them, on their own, can offer only a partial view of complete genres, which are essentially multidimensional. Therefore, it is only by combining various perspectives and frameworks that one can have a more complete view of the elephant. Hence, there was a need to combine methodologies and devise multidimensional and multi-perspective frameworks. My attempt to propose a three-space model was an attempt in this direction (Bhatia, 2004).

In the context of this development, it is important to point out that in the early years of genre analysis, especially in the 1990s, there was relatively little direct discourse analytical work in the available literature published in other disciplinary fields; the situation however in the last few years changed considerably as many professions have made interesting claims about the study of organisations, professions and institutions based on evidence coming from different kinds of analyses of discourse, in particular Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). There has been a substantial increase in research efforts to consider the contributions of discourse analytical studies in disciplinary fields such as law, medicine and healthcare, accounting and management, science and technology, where there is now a better understanding of the role of language not only in the construction and dissemination of disciplinary knowledge, but also in the conduct of professional practices (see for instance, Mumby & Stohl, 1996; Grant, Keenoy & Osrick, 2001; Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002; Grant & Hardy, 2004; Grant, Hardy et al., 2004a & 2004b).

There is a significant recognition of the fact that many of these practices can be better understood and studied on the basis of communicative behaviour to achieve specific disciplinary and professional objectives rather than just on the basis of disciplinary theories. I initiated a project that investigated corporate disclosure practices through their typical communicative strategies of putting together a diverse range of discourses (accounting, financial, public relations, and legal) to promote their corporate image and interests, especially in times when they faced adverse corporate results, so as to control any drastic share price movement in the stock market. To my amazement, I discovered that it was not simply a matter of designing and constructing routine corporate documents, such as the Annual Corporate Reports, but was part of a strategically implemented corporate strategy to exploit interdiscursive space to achieve often complex and intricate corporate objectives through what I have referred to as “interdiscursivity” (Bhatia, 2010) to which I shall return in episode three.

This idea of studying professional practice through interdiscursive exploitation of linguistic and other semiotic resources within socio-pragmatic space was also the object of undertaking yet another project, in which I had collaboration from research teams from more than twenty countries consisting of lawyers and arbitrators, both from the academy as well as from the respective professions, and also discourse and genre analysts, which investigated the so-called “colonization” of arbitration

practices by litigation processes and procedures (see Bhatia et al. 2003, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012 & forthcoming).

To give a brief background to this study let me point out that arbitration was originally proposed as an “alternative” to litigation in order to provide a flexible, economic, speedy, informal, and private process of resolving commercial disputes. Although arbitration awards, which are equivalent to court judgments in effect, are final and enforceable, parties at dispute often look for opportunities to go to the court when the outcome is not to their liking. To make it possible, they often choose legal experts as arbitrators and counsels, as they are likely to be more accomplished in looking for opportunities to challenge a particular award. This large-scale involvement of legal practitioners in arbitration practice leads to an increasing mixture of rule-related discourses as arbitration becomes, as it were, “colonized” by litigation practices, threatening to undermine the integrity of arbitration practice, and in the process thus compromising the spirit of arbitration as a non-legal practice.

The evidence for all these studies referred to above came from the typical use of communicative behaviour, both spoken as well as written, of the participants and practitioners from different countries, disciplinary and professional practices and cultures, rather than just the disciplinary theories. So in the coming few years, we are more likely to find a number of discourse-based studies being published in journals of these disciplines, such as management, medicine, arbitration, etc. The picture that emerges from our current understanding of the field indicates that in addition to ESP or more appropriately LSP, discourse and genre analysis can contribute significantly to our understanding of organisational and institutional practices, in addition to its current applications to discursive and professional practices, in both academic as well as professional contexts. In fact, I would like to go further to suggest implications of current developments in genre theory for areas such as organisational communication, translation and interpretation, and document and information design. The emerging picture can be represented as in Figure 1.

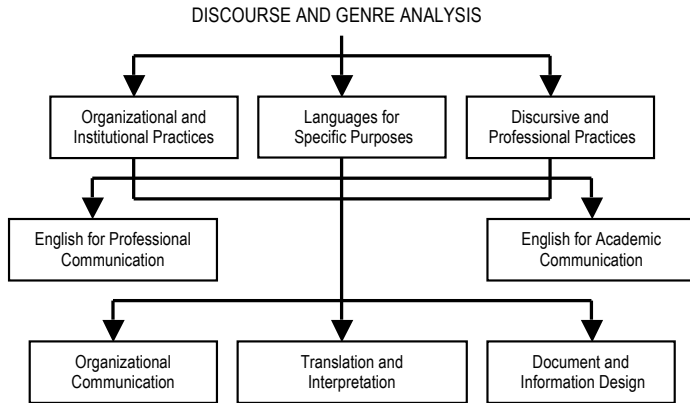


Figure 1. Genre analysis and LSP.

Emphasis in ESP-motivated Genre Analysis (GA) thus is on the production of meaning through the use of linguistic, rhetorical, and sometimes other semiotic resources, with some attention paid to the professional context it is situated in, and the communicative purposes it tends to serve; however, very little attention is generally paid to the way this production and communication of meaning is actually constrained and eventually realised, and in what ways this meaning is intended to be part of professional practices, in addition to what goes into its production, reception and consumption of knowledge so constructed. This emphasis on academic and professional practice in addition to discursive actions encourages an additional perspective to genre analysis, with a focus on what I would like to call “discursive performance”, which extends the scope of analysis from genres as discursive products to professional practice that all discursive acts tend to accomplish. I have made an attempt to refer to this form of analysis as “critical genre analysis” (see for details, Bhatia, 2008a, 2008b & 2010). Let me give more substance to what I mean by this.

Episode two: Critical genre analysis

As briefly introduced here, Critical Genre Analysis (CGA) is an attempt to extend genre theory beyond the analyses of semiotic resources used in professional genres to understand and clarify professional practices or actions in typical academic and professional contexts. I would like to clarify

that in spite of apparent similarities, CGA is meant to be different from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA draws on the critical theory as cultural critique, and focuses on social relations of domination, typically grounded in class relations, including race and gender, specifically focusing on their oppressive sides. CDA thus tends to analyze social structures in such a way that they are viewed as invulnerable. It encourages recognition of domination without offering resources for action against such practices. CDA thus examines social structures and relations and analyzes them in such a way that the analyses encourage the power and domination to disseminate oppressive actions in somewhat unequal social settings.

CGA, on the other hand, is a way of “demystifying” professional practice through the medium of genres. An interesting aspect of this analysis is that it focuses as much on generic artefacts, as on professional practices, as much on what is explicitly or implicitly said in genres, as on what is not said, as much on socially recognized communicative purposes, as on “private intentions” (Bhatia, 1995) that professional writers tend to express in order to understand professional practices or actions of the members of corporations, institutions and professional organizations. In CGA therefore no professional, institutional, or organizational practices are assumed but negotiated. They seem to be in a constant struggle between competing interests. CGA with its focus on practice considers individual members of professional organizations, though bound by their common goals and objectives, still having enough flexibility to incorporate “private intentions” within the concepts of professionally shared values, genre conventions, and professional cultures.

A notion of practice thus describes the relation between shared values and flexibility as dynamically complex, in that institutional and organizational ideologies, and constraints are often conventionalized and standardized, but not always static or inflexible. In professional communication, a theory of practice is a function of organizational and institutional structures as evident in the everyday activities of professionals, and conditions of production and reception are crucial. Besides, in professional communication in the age of computer-mediated communication, CGA also considers the overwhelming power and influence of technology in professional life. Thus professional practices give shape to actions in specific professional contexts, they get established so long as the members of the professional community continue to follow the conventions, which are shared by the members of a specific professional discourse community. CGA makes a commitment, not only to

describe, but also to explain, clarify, and “demystify” professional practice. In this sense, CGA is not an initiative to change professional practices of individual disciplinary, institutional, and corporate communities, but to understand how professional writers use the language to achieve the objectives of their professions.

Episode three: Interdiscursivity

One of the most important concepts that seem to be crucial to the study of professional genres and practices is what has been referred to as “interdiscursivity” (Bhatia, 2010). I have noticed that within the concept of genre and professional practice, one can see expert professional writers constantly operating within and across generic boundaries creating new but essentially related and/or hybrid (both mixed and embedded) forms to give expression to their “private intentions” within the socially accepted communicative practices and shared generic norms (Bhatia, 1995; Fairclough, 1995). Interdiscursivity is invariably across discursive events that may be genres, professional activities, or even more generally professional cultures. It is often based on shared generic or contextual characteristics across two or more discursive constructs and some understanding of these shared features is a necessary condition to an adequate understanding of the new construct. Interdiscursivity thus can be viewed as a function of “appropriation of generic resources” across three kinds of contextual and other text-external resources: genres, professional practices, and professional cultures.

From the point of view of genre theory, especially in the context of professional communication, it is necessary to distinguish appropriations across text-internal and text-external resources, the former often viewed as intertextuality, and the latter as interdiscursivity. Intertextuality operates within what we refer to as “textual space” and has been widely studied (Kristeva, 1980; Foucault, 1981; Bakhtin, 1986; Fairclough, 1995); however, a vast majority of appropriations often take place across text-external semiotic resources at other levels of professional, institutional and disciplinary discourses, such as genres, professional, institutional, and disciplinary practices, and professional, institutional and disciplinary cultures to meet socially shared professional, institutional, and disciplinary expectations and objectives, and sometimes to achieve “private intentions”.

These latter forms of appropriations that operate in what could be viewed as “socio-pragmatic space” are essentially interdiscursive in nature. It may be pointed out that often all these appropriations, whether text-internal or text-external, discursively operate simultaneously at all levels of discourse to realise the intended meaning, and have been widely used in the recontextualization, reframing, resemiotisation or reformulations of existing discourses and genres into novel or hybrid forms. In addition to this, appropriation of generic resources is also very common in various forms of hybrids, such as mixing, embedding and bending of genres (see for details Bhatia, 2004, 2008a, 2008b & 2010). The general picture representing interdiscursivity in genre theory can be summarised as in Figure 2.

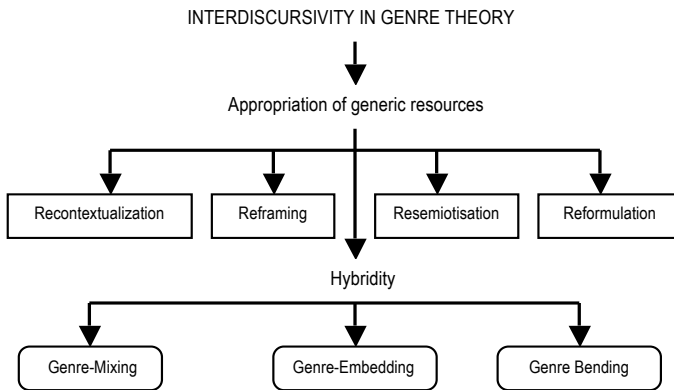


Figure 2. Interdiscursivity in Genre Theory.

I have already mentioned instances of interdiscursivity from at least two professional contexts to illustrate that it operates at all levels, generic, professional practice, and professional culture, but also to claim that it not only allows a more rigorous and comprehensive analysis of genres in and as professional practice, but at the same time, also encourages evidenced-based studies of professional and institutional practices and cultures through the genres they often use.

Epilogue

In this personal reflective narration of my engagement with genre analysis over more than three decades, I have made an attempt to account for the

developments in genre theory right from its early conceptualisation in Swales (1981 & 1990) and Bhatia (1993) through to its later developments as in Bhatia (2004, 2008a, 2008b & 2010). The account is significant in several respects.

Firstly, it traces the development of genre theory from a predominantly lexico-grammatical and rhetorical analysis of genres towards a more interdiscursive and critical genre analysis and understanding of professional practice. It tends to offer a useful procedure for the study of professional practices, which otherwise are often discussed and explained through organizational, management, and other institutional theories (Marshak et al., 2000; Keenoy & Osrick, 2001; Philips & Hardy, 2002; Boje, Osrick & Ford, 2004; Hardy et al., 2004). It thus presents a complementary methodological alternative in the form of genre-based investigations of professional, organizational and institutional practices. Secondly, it indicates a development of genre theory from a purely ESP or LSP pedagogic application to a more critical engagement leading to demystification of the realities of the professional world. Thirdly, it argues for a multidimensional and multi-perspective methodological framework to understand and analyse professional and academic genres, professional practices, and disciplinary and professional cultures as comprehensively as possible.

At a more theoretical level, it thus creates a valuable research space for the development of a more comprehensive and delicate system of interdiscursivity in genre theory (Bhatia, 2010), which has not been sufficiently explored in the current literature on genre. More generally, it underpins the importance of a multidimensional and multi-perspective view of genre analysis, which, I believe, has tremendous potential for the future of genre studies. However, I must emphasize that this reflective account represents a subjective and very much personal and continual engagement with genre theory. I must close this critical account with the reminder that the story is not complete yet, and I am sure there will be much more to reflect on in the years to come.

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individually written books. Two of his books *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings* (Longman, 1993) and *Worlds of Written Discourse: A Genre-based View* (Continuum, 2004) are widely used by researchers in genre theory and practice. Some of his recent research projects include *Analyzing Genre-bending in Corporate Disclosure Documents*, and *International Arbitration Practice: A Discourse Analytical Study* in which he leads research teams from more than 20 countries.