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Genre as difference: The sociality of linguistic variation

Janet Giltrow

In the study of syntactic variation, genre has been an unstable term: fluctuating in the level of generality at which it is applied; intuiting rather than ascertaining the social situations it suggests. In contrast, rhetorical studies of genre have fixed genre at a low level of generality, in local socio-historical scenes, and claimed priority for situation over form. This chapter reviews the debates which led to genre's rhetorical definition as "social action," (Miller 1984) and the benefit and also the cost in disavowing form as definitive of genre. Rhetorical and variation studies of genre can seem fundamentally incompatible in their perspectives on form, yet there may be fertile meeting ground for them. Both invoke function for form, but each in ways incomplete for the study of genre: While rhetorical studies insist on the functionality of form in situation, they do not inquire into form itself; syntactic-variation studies also assume function for form, but define function at such a high level of generality as to fail to capture the social motives in genre's domain. By revisiting function as acutely sensitive to situation – responding to local exigencies and also indicating them – rhetorical and variation studies can meet on the common ground of form, each contributing to the other's discoveries of genre as a site of social differentiation.

1. Introduction

In the language disciplines, *genre* has been a term both easily summoned and easily displaced. Easily summoned, it can name what people recognise as broad similarities in ways of thinking or it can name much narrower formations – predictable wordings or familiar collocations. Easily displaced, it can give way to *discourse* in the broader perspectives or *style* or *register* in the narrower ones. This consortium of terms recognises at once formal regularity and social ties: Although long associated with form and formality, genre also fraternises easily with discourse and register to indicate socialities of speech style, often alluding to institutional or professional settings as in, for example, "medical discourse" or "legal register." Genre can be a term with poor traction perhaps, liable to

theoretical slippage; it is also one which comes to hand to link form and scene, language and society.

And it may be this coupling which tends to disable and dislocate the term. When the dynamics between form and scene are interrupted for inspection – that is, when genre is the object of inquiry – form tends to separate from scene. In different language disciplines, form then takes different roles: as mere formality, for example, or as compliance with convention, or as features' replication and variation. In genre as an everyday speech phenomenon, rather than an object of study, feature and activity "knit," as Bakhtin says in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981: 288). But in *The Problem of Speech Genres* he also says that genres are hard to study (1986: 61). The problem may be that, under study, the knitting ravels, and form is undone from scene. Or that is the tendency.

This chapter briefly reviews some uses and applications of the term genre, especially in its back and forth with register in linguistic approaches to language variation. Turning to other disciplines' approaches to genre, the chapter mentions recent interest in genre in literary studies but concentrates mainly on recent decades of discussion of genre in rhetorical studies and writing studies. New-rhetorical conceptions of genre insisted from the start on the fusion of form and situation, yet form still caused problems, some of which I will outline. These problems were eventually addressed by declaring for situation over form (and in one bold proposal eliminating form all together). But, as I will show, form continued to haunt the project, returning as various issues and nagging concerns.

Equally, genre continues to attend studies of formal variation, although still unstable as a category. Evidently, form belongs with genre, as we might expect from the use of the term when speakers are noticing form and its social ties. The chapter concludes with a demonstration of form under pressure from function – but function at a low level of generality, taking the direct imprint of the social scene. This is the level at which we should look for genre.

2. Genre and register

In the linguistic disciplines, genre has been a relatively untheorised term. When summoned to lay the groundwork or establish the territory for the study of linguistic variation, it can assume rather than examine similarity among instances. Such was Biber and Finegan's (1988) finding in their important studies of the linguistic variation they call stance styles:

> In our earlier work, the texts within each genre were assumed to constitute a coherent linguistic whole, and each traditional genre category was assumed to be linguistically distinct from the others. Subsequent research of ours has indicated that this assumption is not valid; in fact, for some genre categories, greater linguistic differences exist among texts within the categories than across them. (Biber and Finegan 1988: 3)

In other words, the categories deductively assumed as genres were not demonstrated by the linguistic evidence (a hint, perhaps, that the categories were not, in fact, genres). Seeking groupings according to formal features, Biber and Finegan's methods found them not by means of their genre categories but by means of cluster analyses, analyses which discover text types according to speech styles: "speech styles are [...] sets of texts that are similar in linguistic form" (Biber and Finegan 1988: 3). Register, in the meantime, groups texts according to "the relations among participants and other characteristics of the communicative situation," while "genre" groups texts "according to topic and purpose" (Biber and Finegan 1988: 4). Yet the means of measuring participant relations and situation characteristics can be uncertain, despite the field/tenor/mode parameters donated by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and so can the means of knowing topic and purpose as criteria unifying a set of texts.

As Askehave and Swales (2001: 200) observe in their discussion of "genre identification", "what is immediately evident to the genre analyst is not purpose but form and content." Purpose has been taken for granted in their view, either by the very general genre sets named by analysts, such as "instruction, description, recount" (Askehave and Swales 2001: 206) in the SFL-derived series of Sydney School genre study, or by the terms derived from qualitative study, where researchers accept language-users' answers to questions about the purpose of the genres under study. Such names may themselves be as untested as those which researchers come up with – and may indeed come from the same fund of common experience. Askehave and Swales recommend that *communicative purpose* be recursively revisited in genre study, for what they call a "re-purposing" (Swales 2001: 207), always in recognition of the complexity, we might add, of speakers' motives in taking up a way of speaking.

Despite continuing mention of genre in formal corpus studies of linguistic variation across text instances, and despite attempts to distinguish between genre and register, genre on the whole seems to have given way to register. By 2006, Biber suggests that genre and register are interchangeable, and opts for register to name "situationally-defined varieties described for their characteristic lexico-grammatical features" (Biber 2006: 11). Register itself is a porous term, as when Biber, Csomay and Jones (2004) refer to both "written narrative" and scientific research articles as registers, these two classifications deriving from different criteria. Such incommensurability sometimes goes unnoticed, or it may be part of an expedient instability which register inherits from genre. Biber (2006: 12)

says register can be named at any level of generality, and one will find more formal similarity at low levels, less at higher levels.

Yet even as register is in the ascendancy, what could be called genre is still playing a role in identifying social scenes for speech – classroom talk, or live exchanges on television shows, or guest lectures, to take examples from a recent collection (Partington, Morley, and Haarman 2004) of corpus-based studies of linguistic variation – without those identifications being examined for their criteria or definition, for their measure of purpose, let alone for their complex articulation with the social order. And described for their social purpose, genres can still be known only intuitively, as when Bruti (2004) describes the genre of the biology textbook as "a kind of specialised text, especially designed for didactic purposes, i.e. for an audience who needs to be taught the basic notions of the discipline which are generally ignored in expert-to-expert communication because they are part of the specialists' shared knowledge. As a consequence, the genre is one that presents specialist knowledge couched in a didactic style" (Bruti 2004: 125). Although still only an intuitive category, genre is nevertheless called on to establish the territory of many studies of linguistic variation, appearing and disappearing opportunistically.

Current studies of linguistic variation, by increasingly sensitive methodologies, uncover the complexity of form, finding interlacing veins of formal similarity and variation. These veins can be, and often are, mined for function. There might be promise here of reattaching form to sociality and thereby reincorporating form in genre. But function is by and large named at such a high level of generality – for example, evaluation, involvement, clarification, or stance – that the promise is unfulfilled, and genre remains an abstract category rather than the site of social interaction, that is, a site which is historically situated and open to the experience of language users.

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Terms which can displace or be displaced by genre</td><td>Terms which fraternise with genre: those in the first column are more likely to be stipulated; those in the second are more likely to devalue the phenomenon</td><td>- speech style
- register
- text type</td><td>- formulaic wordings
- predictable, routine speech
- form</td></tr>
<tr><td>Term which may or may not be stipulated</td><td colspan="2">- discourse</td></tr>
<tr><td>Terms which can render genre</td><td>Categories intuited by analysts (e.g., academic, guest lecture) or inherited from traditions of analysis (e.g., narrative, description; forensic, epic)</td><td colspan="2">- available speech categories</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 1. The terminological field of *genre*

3. New-rhetorical[1] concepts of genre

Considered a sterile concept for the very formalism which has, in the study of linguistic variation, proved productive, genre has until relatively recently been left fallow in the adjacent fields of literary and rhetorical studies. In literary studies, there have been signs of a genre revival. As long ago as the mid 1980s, Cohen (1986) contradicted genre orthodoxies – namely, that genres were determinate classes – by introducing what might be called a socio-formal view: The naming of genres was a social process and open to the transformation of forms' meanings and functions, according to historical contexts. More recently, an issue of the *Publications of the Modern Language* Association (PMLA, October 2007), literary criticism's flagship journal, is devoted to re-thinking genre, without much advance over Cohen's earlier claims for form, and possibly losing ground to the orthodoxies. The term genre once again appears to be available for any category of similarity, from the ancient genres of epic or lyric, to entirely unsuspected types detected by the most nuanced of literary-critical interpretation, to notice of cross-cultural transfers of motifs and figures. Despite efforts to rehabilitate genre, form appears once again as whipping boy: a policing regime or pigeonholing disdained by literary sensibility. But it also appears as a new dispensation: a "liquefaction" (Dimock 2007: 1378), a "general solvent," a "pool" of features in which texts "swim" (Dimock 2007: 1379). In being separate from situation and the social order, the swimming pool may not be entirely different from the currents of features explored by studies of linguistic variation, but its study is methodologically much less disciplined. At this point in the literary-critical revival of genre studies, there seems to be little on offer to advance the study of linguistic variation.

1. New rhetorical here can mean, generally, new concepts of genre in rhetorical studies, and, more specifically, concepts deriving from the new rhetoric. The new rhetoric extends the notion of persuasion beyond the classical and obvious cases of language designed to manipulate audiences' beliefs and actions to include all uses of language (see Virtanen, this volume, on argumentation). New rhetoricians hold with Kenneth Burke's claim that all language is persuasive and his recognition of "the necessarily *suasive* nature of even the most unemotional scientific nomenclature" (Burke 1966: 45).

Rhetorical studies, however, have more to offer. In U.S. rhetorical studies, mainly neo-classical and concerned deeply but not exclusively with the speech of American leaders, the revival of the concept of genre began in the late 1960s and developed in the 1970s and 1980s a rich discussion of issues and principles. In the 1990s and into this century the discussion spread into the study of writing in institutions, workplaces, and the public sphere – some of the areas occupied by linguistic study of what are called "specialized" texts (e.g., Gotti, this volume). In this latter phase, the discussion also spread beyond America. This chapter recommends new-rhetorical concepts of genre: These concepts stabilise the level of generality at which the term is applied and re-attach it to the social order and the socio-historical experience of language users. Genre can become, thereby, a means of re-connecting to the social order the rich information now flooding in from corpus studies of linguistic variation.

While recommending new-rhetorical concepts of genre, I also point to the deficiencies of these concepts and ways those deficits can be compensated for by the study of linguistic variation. For rhetorical concepts of genre made the advances they did by disavowing form and acclaiming situation as the signal criterion for the category. This conceptualisation provides means for culling merely intuitive or unexamined or inherited applications. But it also leaves form as the problem for genre rather than the site of genre's energies, of genre's capacity to effect the means and motive of variation.

For both linguistic and rhetorical studies, the problem for genre has been how it sorts with form. In both fields, the problem has been addressed by divesting genre of formal definition. In linguistic studies, genre works a-theoretically to rationalise corpora or gives way to avowedly formal study under the auspices of text type, as in Pérez-Guerra and Martínez-Insua (this volume). In rhetorical studies, form has been dismissed from the scope of investigation. But, as I will show below, form does not go quietly: It returns to pester the rhetorical project. Equally, genre, with the speech phenomenon it names, may be waiting to be *invited back as a serious player in the study of linguistic variation, not simply to* oust register or to cancel text type but to find the level at which differentiation is socially meaningful.

3.1. "Genre as social action"

The landmark essay in rhetorical genre theory is Carolyn Miller's *Genre as social action* (1984). It synthesised 15 years of preceding discussions in the U.S., and also raised the stakes. Miller argues that genres are to be classified not by their forms but by the actions they perform, this performance being mutually recognised by groups of language users. So categories which disappoint or

merely contain the study of linguistic variation could be interrogated for "social action": Can instances captured under a general category be said to perform the same social action?[2]

From a definition of genre which classified not types of texts but types of social action, certain principles followed as Miller's proposals were taken up and applied in many research venues:

- Genre cannot be separated from the social scenes of its performance; it cannot be understood separate from situation. (So, "recount" would not be a genre, nor would "description," for neither involves a social scene: no inferable motives for recounting or describing. What moves someone to *recount* or *describe*?)
- Once genre is inseparable from situation, the set of genres must open. As forms of life – work, trade, family, government, institution – change, so too must genres. If a form of life appears, disappears, or transforms, genres must also appear, disappear, or transform.
- Tied to history and locality, the set – open and contingent – drops down from a handful of timeless universals to dated, ground-level inventories of cultural occasions: those mutually recognisable moments when language users feel that something of a certain kind should be said. So, for example, narrative is not a genre but a workplace-incident report is a genre – for employees at my university, for example. This can seem highly particular, but it may be the strict locality of genre that is also its flexibility. Rather than adherence to rules, it is a linguistic experience of roles, material circumstances, and personal histories, and thus prone to revision and adjustment, always open to recognising close similarities (for example, between incident reports at different unionised workplaces) and more distant similarities (for example, to accident reports to police or to insurance bureaus).
- Local and context sensitive, genre knowledge is *tacit*. You can't learn a genre by being told the rules, that is, by being instructed in the form. You have to experience the situation, which itself is socio-historically, culturally embedded. This principle would challenge the pedagogical goals professed by corpus studies aiming to improve L2 instruction by making a full inventory of the formal features of target genres. But more importantly, this principle, recog-

2. Equally, one might ask if formally identical instances used in different contexts perform the same social action. The telling example from later studies of genre is the business letter. Does a text using the format and wording of a typical business letter perform the same action when composed by a student in a business-writing class as it does when composed by a manager in a corporate setting?

nisable from common experience, corroborates the theoretical priority of situation in new-rhetorical genre theory.

By disavowing form, which cannot account for situated experience, or even for itself – that is, it cannot account for why text features recur across instances – rhetorical genre theory opened many new perspectives and research directions: ethnographic- or qualitative-style research especially. But in its disavowal in the 1980s and the 1990s and in this century, too, form has perhaps been taken for granted and remains a troubling presence, disturbing the stages of discussion in rhetorical theory which led up to Miller's landmark article, and returning to haunt the discussion which followed, to this day.

3.2. Trouble with form

In the discussion that led up to Miller's synthesis, form was at one level taken for granted, and treated as well understood. Possibly because form was traditionally apprehended in rhetorical tropes and schemes, "nothing more complicated than patterns of arrangement" (Gronbek 1978: 140), rhetorical appeals (logos, ethos, pathos), and the common and special topoi, form may indeed have been self-evident to rhetorical theorists in the 15 years of discussion which culminated in Miller's article. And many genre theorists, as if to confirm this established understanding, cited Kenneth Burke's statement on form as "the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (Burke 1954: 31).

But while form was apparently taken for granted at one level, in the early stages of the renewal of interest in genre, it was still the pivot of claims for genre's significance, and as Devitt (2009) demonstrates, still centrally involved in the reasoning of the period. One important advocate of rhetorical genre theory claimed in 1973 – ten years before Miller put form to one side – that "[w]hen one knows what characteristics will inform an inaugural [presidential speech] *not yet composed*, one has isolated the generic membranes of the inaugural" (Jamieson 1973: 163, emphasis mine), "generic membranes" being form. Students of linguistic variation, particularly those who catalogue genre features on behalf of L2 learners, might recognise and share this goal. But not all American rhetoricians of the period were happy with predictability. Some theorists were ambivalent, one of these both shunning and entertaining predictability: Genre "should not be thought of as a predictive category necessarily," but "[...] we might be able to interpret or predict" according to the presence of certain conditions in the socio-political situation (Hart 1973: 251, 261). Others were briskly dismissive, seeing genre as a name for what is routine and trivial in speech, genre being only form, or mere formality. For one critic, a certain type of event may be "so ritualized that it is uninteresting to analyze it rhetorically" (Vatz 1973: 160). While students of linguistic variation *separate* genre from form, these opponents of genre criticism *equate* genre with form and, in addition, with mechanical compliance, a kind of automatic speaking. For another critic, it is not this aspect of language that rewards study, but the creative parts of a speech; these parts, not the predictable parts, are the interesting ones. In dismissing genre as unworthy of study, this critic is dismissing what he calls "conventionalized" messages (e.g., scientific discourse) (Wilkerson 1970: 89–91), and possibly what for students of linguistic variation has become the rich field of "specialised texts."

These are just a few samples of the period's extensive discussion on predictability and choice, routine and surprise, these themes all attaching to the recurrence of form. And among critics who advocated genre study – those for whom form was not so oppressive a presence – predictability was a more involving problem than it might be if it were only a matter of calculating text features and extrapolating future instances. It was other than this, however, for function had entered the picture in the first stages of the genre revival. So one prominent critic said that once we knew the form/function formula for a situation, we could predict the instance, even if it occurred only once, or never (Black [1965] 1978: 137). (We might pause to notice how far this claim is from the assumptions supporting the study of linguistic variation, which, with quantitative methods, would be unlikely to discover the single instance, let alone the zero instance. But we might also notice, before we go on, that this position shares with the study of linguistic variation a comfort with prediction based on function, and, in addition, an intimation of a system of form-function resources, some of which may remain unexploited.) Another prominent critic said that a person who had never heard a eulogy would, on the occasion of the death of a friend or leader, rise to speak in eulogistic ways (Jamieson 1973: 163), so functional are the forms of eulogistic speech in the situation of a recent death.

On this view, form is functional rather than conventional, that is, it derives from linguistic resources rather than from standards or customs of use. Yet this is not exactly the principle established by the formulation advanced by *situational rhetoric* (Bitzer 1968, restated 1980), the foundational statement from which much of new genre theory developed. Bitzer saw situations as evolving in recurring, their recurrence activating functional speech, itself recurring accordingly, and gathering audiences and constraints, the latter including *rhetorical forms*.

> Situations (recurring) → Functional Speech (recurring)
> [recurring Functional Speech = formal regularities (including "rhetorical forms")]

While the form of speech in the first instance is activated by its functionality, its recurrence in subsequent instances must be owing in addition to an accumulating

social experience of the form – still functional rather than conventional but also not only functional.

In its first appearance, and its many subsequent applications by others, Bitzer's original, influential statement aroused some objections: Opponents complained that the critic's role as evaluator of aesthetic achievement and adjudicator of ethical responsibility was cancelled if speakers are simply and automatically responding to situation. Bitzer himself must have been sensitive to this kind of attack for he defended his proposals by saying there is no contradiction between predictability and "freedom and creativity" (Bitzer [1968] 1980: 34). While students of linguistic variation are not so worried about freedom and creativity, the form/function problem may not be so far away. Can matches and differences in function alone explain the replication and variation of form? Is each speaker linked directly to the system of linguistic resources, or is the link mediated by interaction with other speakers? In emphasising situation, Bitzer emphasised function. But he did not deny sociality: The recurrence of situations must be a social matter, and so must the accumulation of formal regularities – the fluent transfer of wordings amongst speakers involved in these situations.

In addition, in the matter of the *set* of genres, rhetorical theorists and students of linguistic variation may share issues. We can see that Bitzer's situational rhetoric opens the door to new situations and functional responses to these situations: new genres or the open set. But for most genre critics who followed Bitzer's lead, the set was left closed, Aristotle's classical categories (epideictic, forensic, deliberative) doing a brisk business. For classically trained rhetoricians in America, the closed set may have been politically satisfying. A timeless handful of universal types, the closed set spoke to the American rhetorical taste for keeping in sight at once the ancient instance and the contemporary moment, Socrates and Richard Nixon, both supervised by classical theory. In the study of linguistic variation, the closed set also has its attractions, although different ones. The closed set has oriented study of formal variation, but the closed set in linguistic study has not been shut tight. As Virtanen (this volume) notes, while *narrative*, for example, remains a common term amongst the many versions of the closed set, other terms come and go, a problem Virtanen partly addresses by distinguishing between text type (more formal) and discourse type (more functional).

In American rhetorical theory, the terms of the closed set, inherited from and mandated by antiquity, were non-negotiable. Moreover, the closed set alleviated the problem of predictability. From the high level of generality of the closed set, predictability does not show as a problem: Instances are alike in such a general way that their difference rather than their similarity may be the salient experience, and only a specialist critic would be able to see the resemblance, so

abstract are its terms. So, if we simply predict epideictic speech in the situation "death" then we can still be surprised by the instance and its inventiveness. If, however, we drop to a lower level of generality to identify not just "eulogy" but "mourners' brief, serial recollections of the dead person at Canadian memorial services in the late 20th century" we can begin to predict the statements of the speakers. This is precisely the range of difference and likeness Biber (2006) observes: the higher and more general the register, the fewer the likenesses; the lower and more particular, the more numerous the likenesses.

Attractive as the closed set was, many critics nevertheless recognised the difficulties in applying Aristotelian categories to modern discourse and found hybrids and half-types. But tinkering with the timeless categories was not enough to stop genre theory from moving towards the open set – the set opening for, for example, the social worker's predisposition report or the tax accountant's letter or, more recently, the homeless person's blog, just as it opens in the study of linguistic variation for corporate blogs (Puschmann, this volume), live TV exchanges or guest lectures or biology textbooks, even while general categories continue to preside at their own level. As new genre theory transferred from the reasoning of classically trained rhetoricians to other areas of discourse studies – and eventually from America to other national discussions – the door to the set of genres opened wide. Genre theory was at the open door when Miller's "social action" article was published. (Miller herself was studying Environmental Impact Statements as a genre, not Socrates or Nixon.) And Miller's disavowal of formalism, her claim for the priority of situation over linguistic features, may have seemed to put an end to the skirmishes over form: its bringing into disrepute genre itself as mere formality. But form would not be dismissed so easily.

Ten years after Miller's statement, Devitt (1993) wrote about genre for a wider, but still American, audience, defending it against suspicions of being a name for merely formal compliance. On genre's behalf, she bids for the attention of a sceptical audience of writing specialists; these specialists made up a constituency which had replaced *product* with *process*, a renovation which made form, and accordingly, in their view, genre irrelevant. Pleading for genre, Devitt emphasises choice and efficiency. Writers choose genres, choose "conventions" within genres to suit "their situation" (Devitt 1993: 579): Choosing genres, writers find themselves with a "template" (Devitt 1993: 582). Even though Devitt is as convincing as Miller in disavowing form, form returns, for what else could a "template" be? Or "convention," or even genre? With form back on the table, genre is now recommended for efficiency: Writing would be slowed if we didn't have genres (Devitt 1993: 576). The form has already been vetted for function, by prior speech or speakers. It is on the basis of form – and its pre-selected suitability for situation – that genre can be recommended for respectful attention.

By the mid 1990s, freedom and creativity were making less mischief for genre, but the concept of genre was about to be assailed by critical theory: the feminist, post-colonial, and post-structural analyses of *power*. So, for example, in 2002 the editors of a volume of essays on genre (Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko 2002), like Devitt, recommend genre for convenience, but now the conveniently transferable "formal structures" embody politically significant "attitudes, motives, actions" (Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko 2002: 5), like carriers of nutrients – or infections. Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko are as eloquent as any of the genre theorists in proclaiming how genres arise and evolve interactively in situations, but their concerns in fact again focus on form, this time not for the privilege of choice but for the risk of indoctrination: how long, they ask, can writers in institutional settings comply with "formal structures" before they identify with their values (Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko 2002: 4)? While form continues to haunt the discussion, neither the editors of this volume nor Devitt before them, nor Miller, actually present any formal structures for inspection. These areas of discourse studies took form seriously not for being an object of inquiry to be measured, recorded, or even defined, but instead for its capacity to install in language users efficient templates or, more ominously, the interests of the privileged classes.

Each of these phases in the rhetorical re-conception of genre has been a struggle with sameness: how to interpret formal regularities. Are formal regularities to be known for predictability and therefore the trivial, supposedly uninteresting, even regrettably non-creative aspect of utterance? Or should we think of them not in terms of predictability but in terms of expectations and appreciate formal regularities as ways language users know one another? Is formal regularity the basis for the analyst's prediction or the language user's expectations? Are formal regularities mechanical compliance or rational efficiency? Are they indoctrinating infestations or vectors of cultural continuity?

To be sure, these questions are not ones which immediately arise for language-variation specialists. Especially for students of language variation who aspire to L2 pedagogical effectiveness, veins of sameness across instances are a boon – a windfall for the classroom and not a troubling reiteration. Yet the circumstances of this controversy have parallels in language study. Just as rhetorical theories of genre have taken form for granted – as if we know what it is, and we know intuitively which forms bespeak which genres – students of language variation take for granted the extant genres, as if we know the social actions in which the formal aggregations participate.

Of rhetorical theorists we might ask, how has it been possible to go ahead without facing form? Possibly, amongst classical rhetoricians, form was silently understood. But of later theorists we might simply ask, why not study form? One answer may be that the disavowal of form, or at least its relegation, has resulted

in powerful analyses based in situation and sociality: *action* rather than simply function. And then, the situational analysis, beginning in classical rhetorical studies and travelling to other areas of discourse studies, has been so powerful as to produce research of great significance, especially in the area of professional communities (social workers, central-bank policy analysts, academic researchers, engineers, doctors and medical students), all without methodical attention to form.

So vigorous and explanatory has been the social action principle that one important researcher has proposed that form may play no part at all in some genres. Form is finally chased off by Medway's (2002) study of student-architects' sketchbooks – a genre apparently entirely diverse in instances: in "physical format" (coil or no coil, from $8'' \times 11''$ to $6'' \times 4''$, black, green, maroon...) (Medway 2002: 128); in "internal organization"; in "'inscriptional' [...] semiotic modes" – proportions of and relations between writing and drawing differed widely; in "spatial and graphic form" – from lots of white space to no space (Medway 2002: 129); and from no sentences to "solid prose" (Medway 2002: 129–130). Yet people recognise the sketchbooks as such. Medway estimates that definitions of genre have been in the hands of those studying highly institutionalised genres: As a result genre has been defined as reusable "solutions," "plug-ins," "templates," and "ossifications" (Medway 2002: 125, 135). Medway rescues the definition of genre from these kinds of studies and proposes that "when people do roughly similar sorts of textual things in circumstances perceived as roughly similar, then we are in the presence of a social fact – and let's call it a genre" (Medway 2002: 141), and he thereby forfeits all criteria relating to "textual regularity" (Medway 2002: 142). This is a brave proposal, and one way of getting rid of the problem of sameness, but not perhaps of making peace with form.

Rhetorical genre theory is important for having directed attention to horizons of social experience, and the disavowal of form may have been necessary to opening this spectacle. But form has also haunted genre theory, seeking its day. Similarly, studies of linguistic variation, by default disavowing genre, are haunted by the interchangeability of register and genre, by the skirmishes between text type and genre, and by the eternal return of genre itself. But it is possible to arrange for genre to meet form in the light of day, without also returning to the impasse over sameness in rhetorical studies, or having to strike a bargain with convention, or having to leave genre only with the housekeeping duties it is assigned in the study of language variation.

We can think of genre as the site of differences rather than sameness: the place where function differentiates form, that is, produces language variation – but only when function is latched to *action situated in a social scene*. There is

precedent for doing this, from a theorist who, from the mid-stages of new genre theory to the present, has played an influential role. Mikhail Bakhtin was very interested in genre, seeing genres as the engines of heteroglossia, the responsiveness of language to groups' activities and coalitions of interest. He mentions genres first amongst *centrifugal* forces, the ones which pull language away from the standardising centre towards the variety and variation to be found in local scenes of shared interest and activity:[3] "This stratification is accomplished first of all by the specific organisms called *genres*. Certain features of language (lexicological, semantic, syntactic) will knit together with the intentional aim, and with the overall accentual system inherent in one or another genre [...]" (Bakhtin 1981: 288).

Unfortunately, Bakhtin is more likely to list the profusion of everyday genres[4] and proclaim their stratifying, diversifying effects than actually to demonstrate these effects. Still, the spirit of Bakhtin's claim about the knitting of features of language is hospitable to today's corpus-based projects in language-variation studies. At the same time, his perspective on genre is hospitable to the situation-based, rhetorical theory of genre. In these capacities, genre works as a multiplier

Syntactic-variation studies	New-rhetorical studies
FORM	*Form*
Function ↓↑ Purpose	**SOCIAL ACTION**
Context	**Situation** ↓↑ **Motive**

Figure 2. Emphases in syntactic-variation and new-rhetorical studies of genre

3. As usual, very sensitive to the prospect of sameness, genre theorists have read Bakhtin as attributing genre to the *centripetal* forces which produce the official, *unitary* language of the centre – the forces, that is, roughly, of standardisation. Genre theorists have taken Bakhtin's concept of genre as centralising when in fact he says the opposite.

4. Following the quotation above, a list of genres unrolls: "oratorical, publicistic, newspaper and journalistic genres, the genres of literature (penny dreadfuls, for instance), or finally, the various genres of high literature" (Bakhtin 1981: 288–289). Similar lists continue to roll out in *The Problem of Speech Genres*: for example, "chronicles, contracts, texts of laws, clerical or other documents, various literary scientific, and commentarial genres, official and personal letters, rejoinders in everyday discourse [...]" (Bakhtin 1986: 62). Oliver (2005) notes that Bakhtin's lists are a "grab-bag," and taunt attempts at taxonomy.

of difference, situation impinging on form to perform local functions indigenous to a social scene. A brief look at the function of deontic modality in the research genres will show this differentiation. Deontic modality, as we will see below, is by functional definition counter-indicated for the research genres, but inviting attention nevertheless for its unpredicted appearance in these genres.

4. Demonstrating difference: Deontic modality in research genres

To demonstrate genre as the engine of variation, we have to confront function, and the level at which it is named. According to general definitions, *should, must, ought to, have to* involve social authority – this is the function of the form deontic modality:

- obligation and necessity (Coates 1983),
- what is obligatory, permitted, or forbidden (Palmer [1979] 1990),
- evaluation of the moral acceptability, desirability or necessity of a state of affairs; involving notions of "avoidance," "permission," "obligation" (Nuyts 2001: 25),
- a prescriptive use of language, "recommendation" (Vihla 1999: 62), involved in obligations and regulations (Vihla 1999: 23); associated with "norm authorities" (Vihla 1999: 31).

According to these definitions of its function, the form deontic modality is counter-indicated for the research genres, academic writing being known for the stance style "facelessness" (Biber and Finegan 1989: 103): in other words, characterised by a relative absence of "lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgements, or commitments concerning the propositional content of a message." Others describe the "neutrality" of "technical texts," which "resonate with the history of a scientific tradition in society. They are expected to be 'objective' and interpersonally 'neutral,' realizing semantics of validity rather than morality" (Fuller 1998: 48). Accordingly, editors of a volume on modality (Gotti and Dossena 2001) predict that, in fulfilling the expectation of neutrality, writers of "specialist" texts (like the research genres) "often choose not to use the type of modality commonly employed to place somebody under an obligation – that is, deontic modality – for this would produce the opposite effect. Their mastery, instead, is shown by the adoption of a more neutral tone and the use of less subject-oriented modality such as dynamic or epistemic" (Gotti and Dossena 2001: 14).

So far, function is named at a high level of generality and the purpose of the relevant genres is named only intuitively or by common sense: almost anyone

could say that technical, scientific, or research genres are "neutral" sounding. According to these criteria for function and genre, deontic modality is not predicted to appear in the research genres. Yet in fact deontic modals do appear in the research genres. So the question then becomes, what factors in this scene of activity constrain their appearance, or what factors both call for deontic modality and particularise its use? In a study (Giltrow 2005) of 105 articles[5] in three disciplines (Social Psychology, Urban Geography, and Forestry) I found two types of deontic modals. The first type appeared in contexts where the making of knowledge itself was represented: the methods, motives, directions of research, and researchers. I call these modals "knowledge deontics." The second type appeared in contexts representing actions by people who are not researchers and not involved in knowledge making: people not, figuratively or literally speaking, in the laboratory but in the field. I call these modals "field deontics." These are custom terms: that is, drawing on high-level definitions of function but stipulated at a low level of generality, and possibly inapplicable to any other genres.

4.1. Knowledge deontics

Knowledge deontics tend to appear towards the beginning and end of articles in these disciplines. At the end – a position favoured more by Social Psychology than by the other disciplines – the deontic calls for more research in light of the present findings. For example,

> (1) *Future research* ***should*** *examine these possible contingencies and assess the effects of these factors more systematically. Specifically, the accountability conditions [...]* ***should*** *be more thoroughly investigated [...].* (Social Psychology, quoted in Giltrow 2005: 181)

The broad functional definition of the form might analyse this occurrence as risking a Face Threatening Act (FTA), as being personal and committed rather than impersonal and neutral, but it seems to be, instead, not a literal dictate, but a way of emphasising or qualifying the present findings: a highly specialised function for this form – "knitting," in Bakhtin's sense, a feature with the locality of research activity. More common in my sample than end-positioned deontic modals were those positioned at the beginnings of articles, where they represent the knowledge project as dictated by the responsibilities of the discipline and

5. In each of the three disciplines six premier journals were identified through "snowball" citation analysis and through consultation with discipline specialists. From each of the six journals in each of the three disciplines, three articles were selected from 1998: the first article in the first issue, the third in the second, and so on. Articles were also selected from 1999 issues of the journals: the sixth in the first issue, the fourth in the second, and so on.

impose obligations on others to do what, in fact, the reported research does do. For example, in

> (2) *We* ***must*** *develop a more sensitised appreciation of the role of sound in making and remaking space [...].* (Urban Geography, quoted in Giltrow 2005: 180)

that role of sound is the topic of the article.

We might wonder, if deontics are about social obligation and high moral ground, why they are useful in the neutral and impersonal research genres. The answer may be that the general function defined for this form is, in actuality, differentiated by the push of the genre: the push of the situation's roles, interests, circumstances, and identifications. We can analyse deontics as not imposing obligation or enforcing moral judgement but as enacting a disciplinary consensus, introducing or confirming research motives and the highly specialised orientations which distinguish the disciplines both from the non-research world and from one another. The sound/space approach may be new and about to be taken up, but most knowledge deontics prescribe actions already agreed upon. They are not really things researchers have to be told to do. So the Urban Geography sample turned up similarity in prescriptions for research: In the sample of 33 articles, seven obligate researchers to watch for the complicities of *race* and *place*. Two are nearly identical:

> (3) *Chinese immigrants in LA vs. NYC* race ***should*** *be understood as socially constructed [...].*
>
> (4) *Male youth unemployment* racial difference ***should*** *be understood as socially constructed [...].* (Urban Geography) (both quoted in Giltrow 2005: 181)

Others repeat similar obligations: for example, *we must consider the geographically contingent nature of prejudice and discrimination*, and *we must unnaturalize landscapes in terms of gender and race*. The broad form/function definition of deontic modality would tell us that people are being placed under obligation – imposed on – to do something they might not otherwise do. But in fact there appears to be agreement on what ought to be done. Modal-deontic expressions may be performing functions which derive but also depart from directive ones. They may consolidate research interests and emphasise the researcher's share in these interests: a response to a situation in which activity is disciplined by a research paradigm.

4.2. Field deontics

Field deontics formally impose obligations on actors who are *not* members of the research community, as in the following examples:

(5) *[...] cooperation **must** be maintained [...].* (Forestry)

(6) *[...] fire managers **should** start the day with [...].* (Forestry)

(7) *[...] intervention strategies **should** focus on old and poor neighbourhoods and minority neighbourhoods [...] intervention strategies should address housing quality and maintenance [...].* (Urban Geography)

(8) *[...] selection interchange sites **should** take account of Arab potential; [...] the areas under consideration **should** vary in distance [...].* (Urban Geography [+ 11 more obligations]) (all quoted in Giltrow 2005: 184–185)

Strict conditions both limit and, by limiting, activate the expression of obligation. First, field obligations are a special kind of prescription, one that finds a responsibility to act on research findings rather than on some other basis, such as good will or propriety: *We have found out x, so y should be done.* The new knowledge ratifies the dictate, but more importantly, the dictate shows that the knowledge presented is attested by research: the only basis for prescription. Second, the actors who are obligated make up a specified population: urban planners or forest managers, for example. But whether the field, consisting of practitioners, professions, and institutions, ever hears the dictates or not, the dictates signal the quality of the research findings by indicating that they can be acted on. And the very containment of the prescription, limited to a field of designated professionals, corroborates the status of the findings. Both conditions – the restriction to action based on research-attested knowledge and the containment within a professional field – not only reconcile deontic modality with the neutrality of the research genres but also make deontic modality a testament to that neutrality. These constraints are not what we would predict from broad definitions of function applied at a high level of generality, such as academic writing. In these genres, under these circumstances, deontic modality's function converts to the service of the neutral authority of science. The form will function differently in financial advice columns, and differently again in parliamentary speeches, or in judicial reasons.

Beyond these patterns, the function is further differentiated amongst these three disciplines: At a still lower level of generality, the form functions differently in Forestry, Social Psychology, and Urban Geography, according to the social and institutional affiliations of these disciplines. Forestry, for example, projects itself onto a field densely regulated by both official policy and optimum timber yield, and its pattern of prescription is accordingly different from that in Social Psychology or Urban Geography. In turn, in Urban Geography, deontics are more likely than in the other disciplines to be found in reported speech, possibly attesting to that discipline's articulation with political activism. But even the broader patterns show that once mobilised in a genre, and subject to the push of

situation, local interest, and current coalitions, form is differentiated. By tracing the contingency of form and its function, we get close to the diversifications and stratifications of language which Bakhtin attributes to genre. But, to draw near this hotbed of variation, we need to track genre through the open set to the low level of generality and locality which rhetorical theories of genre, after much struggle, recommend. Genre is the name for these ground-level differentiations, where the sociality of, in this case, research – its internal affiliations and its external ones, its cultivation of the cultural phenomenon of methodology – press formal function into service.

5. Partnerships for genre and variation

Where the research concern is indeed strictly with forms, their changes over time, or their distribution over populations, genre is a dispensable concept. When the concern is not so strictly formal, when it broaches function and text type, genre is a useful partner in the study of linguistic variation. To be a useful partner, genre must locate at a lower level of generality than may have been traditionally assumed, at a level of social activity which already attracts the attention of students of linguistic variation: on-line medical advice, the live TV exchange, the guest lecture, or the corporate blog, for example. In turn, at these levels, study of linguistic variation becomes an indispensable partner to the study of genre, coaxing out the actualities of situation.

To establish this partnership, terms such as function and purpose may need to be re-tooled to contribute to the more complex and realistic notion of social action. For example, interpersonal pronouns (discussed by Puschmann, this volume) can be defined for their function as indexing communicative roles. But Puschmann's study of the genre of the corporate blog (a low-level classification, lower even than blog) shows that in practice the form is pushed by situation to more complex performance. This performance is in turn contained in its range, for some combinations hint at other genres, such as advertisement. Puschmann's study suggests how analysis of a form and its variation, inter- and intra-generically, can be interrogated for its functional reach, in this case designing the positions of corporate self-representation. Other forms may be equally eligible for interrogation of situated function, such as those forms contributing to syntactic complexity (Pérez-Guerra and Martínez-Insua, this volume), or those associated with narrative or description (Virtanen, this volume). Inquiries into the local action of forms may expand and enrich the notion of function. So, too, may historical portraits of genres at their emergence also elaborate our sense of what counts as "purpose." Gotti's account (this volume) can tell us that

there is opportunity in heeding Askehave and Swales' (2001) cautions against complacency around communicative purpose. His outline of the social scene from which the experimental article emerged shows that, while it is sensible to describe the purpose of this emergent genre as being to disseminate information widely and promptly, it is also not enough. The forms called on to execute this purpose also ramify in function: They are swept into a recursive series of motives, an interlocking sociality which attends the forms in, as Gotti (this volume) says, quoting Valle (1999: 111), "concentric" circles of reception. At the inner circle of reception, the forms consolidate and promote a *community of practice*, functioning also in the outer circles as measures of character which articulate with the stratifications of the social order. These effects could be captured neither by the agent-effacement function of the passive, for example, nor by the explicit purpose of disseminating information. Yet neither could the linguistic dynamism of this social scene be captured without methodologically precise attention to form. Possibly the high levels of classification, the levels deserted by genre, are most productively occupied by inquiry which, by means of relatively abstract categories, establishes the forms which are worth pursuing. In their broad or narrow distributions, their development or decline, these forms will be the ones with a guarantee of meaning, searchable and potential at the ground-level of genre.

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