

# 1 *Toward a world of genre*

## Opening Remarks

This book can be conceived of as having three parts. The first three chapters work toward establishing a framework, both theoretical and pragmatic, for the extensive discussion of research genres themselves (both spoken and written) to come. Among other things, this framework “situates” the research world in a wider context, discusses its various constellations of genres, reviews the status of the “non-native speaker of English” in that world, and reflects on possible roles for the analyst. The following four chapters deal with a selection of research genres themselves, often closing with suggestions for those involved in English for Academic Purpose (EAP) and English for Research Purpose (ERP) activities of various kinds and for those interested in gaining a better understanding of the research world and its discursal products and processes. Finally, in the shorter concluding chapter, I attempt to relate the main arguments and findings to a number of issues, particularly those raised by contrastive rhetoric, critical discourse analysis, and corpus linguistics.

*Research Genres* is different in many respects from my earlier volume in this series, *Genre Analysis* (1990). Obviously enough, there have been dramatic changes in applied language studies between the late 1980s and the first years of the new millennium. Specifically, in the intervening years there has been a continuing and accelerating interest in centralizing the concept of genre in specialized language teaching and in the development of professional communication skills. I know of a dozen relevant books published between 1993 and 2002 that have the word *genre* in their title, and there are others of at least equal relevance with other titles, such as Johns’s *Text, Role and Context* (1997), Dudley-Evans and St. John’s *Developments in English for Specific Purposes* (1998), and Hyland’s *Disciplinary Discourses* (2000). Genre-based approaches to academic writing have infiltrated the textbook field, starting with Weissberg and Buker’s *Writing Up Research* (1990) and including two with which I have been associated (Swales & Feak, 1994; Swales & Feak, 2000). Over the last dozen years or so, there have been internationally a surprising number of Ph.D. theses or dissertations in this area, and a growing accumulation

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of research findings has appeared in book chapters and in the pages of journals such as *English for Specific Purposes*, *Applied Linguistics*, and *Written Communication*. In all, the textual traffic around the plaza where *genre*, *disciplinary community*, and *task-based* materials run into each other has become increasingly heavy in recent years.

One major aim of this book then is to reassess what we know of genres, their producers and their consumers, and the contexts in which they occur. However, the substantial increase in genre studies now makes it impossible in any reasonably sized work to offer a comprehensive review of publications dealing with the academic world in its multifaceted entirety. In consequence, I have restricted my focus to the *research* genres of that world and have left out elements that pertain particularly to undergraduate education, such as textbooks, general lectures, examinations, undergraduate tutorials, and office hours. In any event, Johns's 1997 volume in this series covers this sector very well, as do many of the volumes coming out of the "new rhetoric" movement in the United States (e.g., Winsor, 1996) and those produced under the aegis of systemic-functional linguistics in Australia (e.g., Burns & Coffin, 2001).

This particular volume is primarily situated in the U.S. research world, and much of the data in it is drawn from that world. The main reason for this restriction is quite simple. Since 1985, I have been working at an American university where – among other things – I have been regularly teaching advanced writing courses for international doctoral students drawn from across the campus. However, I have tempered these first-hand experiences with reports from elsewhere where appropriate and available, and these are particularly visible in Chapter 4 and the second half of Chapter 6. If, of course, there is to be a national restriction of this kind, then the fact that the United States has become a research superpower mitigates its effects. According to my medical informant (John Benfield), medical researchers around the world often discuss whether somebody has a "BTA degree" (Been-to-America), that is, whether they have had the opportunity of a spell at a U.S. research institution.

I also have expanded my own sense of research world communications to include those that take place in the oral mode. A major reason for this has been my current attempt to see genres no longer as single – and perhaps separable – communicative resources but as forming complex networks of various kinds in which switching mode from speech to writing (and vice versa) can – and often does – play a natural and significant part. A further reason is that since 1997 I have been involved with the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (or MICASE). This is a database of 150-plus speech-events recorded in the late 1990s across the Ann Arbor campus and later transcribed and made available for anybody to consult at <http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/micase>. In consequence, I have been able to explore the characteristics of certain spoken

research genres, attend to the similarities and differences between academic speech and academic writing, and try to puzzle out some of the interdiscoursal relations between written and spoken research genres. For one example, in Chapter 4, I deal with the Ph.D. dissertation (or thesis) and in the following one with its defense (or oral examination).

In the late 1980s, the “genre movement” was in its infancy; in fact, as far as I am aware, the first use of the term *genre* in ESP only occurred in 1981.<sup>1</sup> In the earlier contribution to this series, therefore, I spent considerable space on tracing the origins of a genre-based approach to specialized language teaching and in providing illustrative justifications for its effectiveness. Today, I do not think such efforts are so necessary, even if *experimental* research establishing the value of genre-based activities remains surprisingly limited. Even so, today I believe that there is widespread adherence to a position such that, more broadly, “rhetorical consciousness-raising” and, more narrowly, “focus on form” are, at least for educated advanced learners, important elements in any major pedagogical strategy (e.g., Ellis et al., 2001). As a result, I have left more of the task of articulating the relation of genre to language learning and teaching to others, such as Paltridge’s *Genre and the Language Learning Classroom* (2001) or Johns’s edited collection, *Genre and pedagogy: Multiple Perspectives* (2002).

The very interest in genre in the allied fields of composition research, rhetorical studies, business and technical communication, applied discourse analysis, and English for specific purposes has, at the same time, problematized the concept. Such is the nature of the academy. One of the aims of this volume, therefore, is to try to make sense of a number of issues that have arisen. These will include the complexities that have been uncovered by the likes of Casanave (1995) and Prior (1998) in the processes of genre acquisition on the part of graduate students, and the challenges their discussions pose for the kind of “climbing an academic ladder” metaphor that I have at times proposed. These issues extend to grappling with the tricky concept of author agency (“Who is really responsible for the discourse here?”) and the even trickier one of handling an author or speaker’s supposed “private intentions” and “strategic manipulation” (Bhatia, 1993). Other questions arise: How much *context* (historical, social, material, personal) do we need to take account of in order to gain an appropriate level of insight into specific genre exemplars; how cautious do we need to be about the ostensible “purposes” of genres; and what is an appropriate relationship between structural models of genres and their (adapted) deployment in educational settings? The underlying thrust of these concerns raises the question of what kind of genre theory serves us best if our ultimate objectives are pedagogic. Is there a single one-size-fits-all or “best” genre theory for all circumstances? Or would we be better off, in terms of applied linguistics, with a vision of

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genre that is somehow different from the one that might be most suitable for literary study, for rhetorical theory, or for rhetorical history, or, indeed, for understanding the full complexity of discursive practices in workplace settings (Beaufort, 1998; Dias et al., 1999)?

The general issues raised in the preceding paragraphs provide much of the material for the first three chapters. The rest of this opening chapter takes on board three main topics. The first concerns certain more general contemporary trends currently impinging on research genres. The second tackles the difficult question of how best to conceptualize *relations* among genres and genre exemplars. The chapter ends with some initial reflections on the similarities and differences between research writing and research speaking (in English). In Chapter 2 I turn somewhat aside to discuss the growing influence of the English language in the contemporary research world and the implications of this for the researcher currently categorized – and often marginalized – as a “non-native speaker of English.” In Chapter 3 I then focus on the nature of genre itself and then explore certain theoretical and methodological issues in our analyses of genres. The chapter closes with some further thoughts as to the kind of genre theory that might serve practitioners and researchers in English for Research Purposes best, that is, one that offers a theoretical positioning that is manageable but respectable – one that is sensitive without being debilitatingly complex.

### Aspects of Contemporary Life

As I have said, this book focuses fairly narrowly on the genres of today’s research world. However, it is hard not to recognize that certain broader contemporary trends have impinged on research communications in various ways. It is thus the purpose of this next section to gloss over a number of these, albeit in often a sketchy manner, in order to establish a working context for what is to come. Some of these trends, particularly as most prominently evidenced in more developed societies, are themselves controversial. Some, such as the commodification of higher education, are controversial because there are legitimate disagreements with regard to how far the trend has gone and whether it is reversible, at least in part. Others, such as the spread of computer-based technologies, are no longer argued about today in terms of their existence or extent, but instead are contentious in terms of whether their effects are wholly positive.

#### *Generification*

One continuing phenomenon centrally relevant to this volume has been an increasing *generification* of administrative and academic life,

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particularly but by no means exclusively in the Northern Hemisphere.<sup>2</sup> As many readers will attest, performance evaluations and productivity assessment exercises in the university world have become over the last decade increasingly elaborated. Today there are “league tables” of numerous kinds. Moreover, probationary periods, conflict resolutions, claims of discrimination, and attempts at dismissal have become document-rich, multistage administrative undertakings. Today, such elaborations orchestrate review processes of all kinds, such as those involved in the awarding of tenure, the gaining of promotion, and the hiring of new faculty. If a unit in my college (the University of Michigan’s College of Literature, Science, and Arts) today desires to hire a new assistant professor, that unit needs to include certain kinds of information in its *position request* (the name of this particular genre) that were not required when I joined the University of Michigan in 1985. For example, units are now expected to explain how the new “hire” will fit into the unit’s working *five-year-plan* (a genre that itself did not exist – as a regularized requirement – ten years ago) and to discuss in detail the national pool of various minorities in the targeted specialty and the unit’s chances of making a minority hire.

Of course, it is also true, at least in U.S. contexts, that certain kinds of information, such as an individual’s age, sex, marital status, and nationality, are no longer required on, say, job application forms, in order to head off potential sources of various kinds of discrimination. However, the irony here is that these “simplifying” exclusions are themselves regulated by a complex assemblage of documents, starting from federal laws and finishing up with an organization’s Standard Practice Guides (another genre) or procedure manuals. These processes of generification today require us to pay much closer attention to the operation of genre *systems* (or hierarchies, sets, networks, or other kinds of collectivity). While a decade or more ago it might have been justifiable – in those pioneering days – to focus on gaining a better understanding of *single* genres, such as the research article, in the very early twenty-first century, especially following the pioneering work of Devitt (1991) and Bazerman (1994a; 1994b), concentration on such partial, if often valuable, studies is no longer the only possible approach. Of course, I do not want to imply from the foregoing that in contemporary occupational life *everything* is now regulated and documented – for good or ill – by official or quasi-official arrays of genres. All countries and institutions doubtless still have a place for “old boy” networks, or for secret deals to be negotiated in increasingly smokeless rooms, or for powerful figures to make unilateral and arbitrary decisions, but current trends would seem to indicate, at least on the surface, some diminution of such phenomena.

Another sign of this generification process has been increasing use of the word *genre* itself, which has continued to expand in scope and frequency from its original uses in art history and literary criticism. So

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today it is now commonly used when categorizing films, popular music, TV programs, books and magazines, promotional activities, and many other products from other slices of life. I have recently, for instance, heard the term applied to elevators, chairs, garden ornaments, and cuisines (“I have eaten just about every genre of food there is”). There is, or perhaps was, a popular music group with (as best can be gleaned from its name) possibly revolutionary aspirations, because it actually called itself *Genocide* (Sunny Hyon, personal communication). Not so long ago, in the central administration building of my university, I overheard one senior administrator say to another in discussing options for some kind of publicity initiative, “Well, actually I would choose another genre of genre for that.”

*Technology*

As my colleagues in the English Language Institute would be the first to attest, I would seem to be one of the least qualified people to talk with any authority about the transformation in our working lives brought about by the personal computer. But let me offer a simple personal illustration. The *Genre Analysis* book was written in the late 1980s by hand on double-lined paper, and these palimpsestic sheets were then keyboarded onto those obsolete five-inch black floppy disks by my longtime secretary, Rosemary Tackabery. A dozen years later, I sit in front of my home computer and do it all myself – except for some help with the more complicated tables and figures. Although I had originally envisioned that this volume would require notes of some kind, primarily in order to reduce heavy citational presence on the main pages, my decision to use chapter end notes was greatly facilitated by my much-belated discovery of the wonderful auto-numbering footnote feature in the word processing program I am using.

Even in my limited case, other instances of technologically induced change are not hard to come by. Material for the earlier book was largely solicited by mail; today, nearly everything is done by e-mail, with many useful contributions arriving from around the world via the instant magic of attachments. Nowadays I make fewer physical visits to the main university library to review the latest serials but ask the ELI's library assistant to try to find things online; and today I tend to use the Institute for Scientific Information's Web of Science electronic database rather than the hard copy volumes of its three citation indexes. Others doubtless have much richer and more impressive stories to tell of how electronic communications have transformed their lives.

These technological effects on genre – and generification – are simultaneously overt and insidious. Whatever the effect of staring at a blinking

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cursor rather than at a blank sheet of paper has on the initial writing process, computer-based communications have clearly increased everybody's expectations for revision, whether this applies to drafts of our students' papers, to articles we submit for publication, to "difficult" memos, or to the preparation of theses and dissertations. In the last case, all parties can reasonably expect more changes, following oral examination, to documents extant on hard drives than to those that had been frozen on the page by a typewriter (see Chapter 4). Myers (2000) offers a particularly rich and illuminating discussion of the intersection of technology and genre in which he discusses the effects of PowerPoint on his own lecture preparation, delivery, and reception.<sup>3</sup> After dealing with some of the more obvious consequences, such as the bulletization of information, he goes on to write:

... the written text, produced by the machine, has become the star; I am reduced to an unseen voiceover of my own lectures. That may not matter in a business setting, where different people from sales or personnel may be called upon to speak the same words. But for a university lecturer, it marks a shift in what Goffman (1981) called *footing*; that is, I am seen as the animator rather than the source of the utterance. Instead of my speaking with the aid of some visual device, the text is speaking with my aid. (p. 184)

Although some may feel that this account of technological impact is a little exaggerated, more generally Myers also discusses how this new piece of technology blurs the boundaries between the academic and the commercial, and between the written and the visual. He also argues that his discussion of PowerPoint highlights two problems for more traditional approaches to genre analysis. One is that material developments in technology can undermine traditional assumptions about neat and contained communicative purposes (in his case, the purposes of lectures); the other is that the analyst's preference for stable rhetorical action ("This is what this kind of text does") does not easily countenance fairly rapid temporal change. Both the issue of communicative purpose and that of genre change are of theoretical and practical importance and will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

Another relevant factor is the growth of electronic communications through the Internet and the World Wide Web. Only a few years ago there were many predictions that Godzilla English would come to completely dominate these communications. Crystal (2001), however, marshals cogent and convincing evidence to argue that these predictions are turning out to be wrong. One clear sign of this is that more and more non-Anglophone newspapers from around the world are now available on the Web and are increasingly being read by speakers of those languages, especially when they find themselves far away from their native



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lands. Other pieces of evidence that Crystal cites, out of many, include the claim that 90 percent of Web pages in Japan are now in Japanese and a prediction by AltaVista that the proportion of the Web in English will continue to fall. With current advances in the electronic handling of nonalphabetical scripts, the original dream of the Internet and the Web as vehicles for open communication among individuals living in diverse political systems, and different economic circumstances and sharing languages other than English may yet come to be realized, both in the research world and outside it.

In this increasingly technological world, there is one more specialized software development of particular relevance to genre-based studies and applications. This is corpus linguistics, some collection (or corpus) of electronic texts plus some appropriate concordancing software (such as *Wordsmith Tools*<sup>4</sup>), which permits rapid assembly of Key Words in Context (KWIC), instant word frequency lists of various kinds, and distributional plots of selected words and phrases. At the time of the writing of *Genre Analysis*, corpus linguistics was in its infancy – Sinclair's seminal volume, *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*, was not published until 1991 – and there was almost no corpus material easily available that was directly applicable to those working in EAP or ERP. Today, the situation is different and still changing rapidly, but questions remain about how best to incorporate these powerful new techniques into our research agendas and into our provision of EAP/ERP support services.

*Commodification*

Fairclough (1992a; 1992b) was one of the first linguists to discuss commodifying trends in higher education, particularly in terms of “the marketization of the discursive practices of universities” (1993: 143). In his 1993 article, he shows increasingly promotional elements in exemplars of four genres: Advertisements for academic posts, packets of materials given to conference participants, curricula vitae,<sup>5</sup> and prospectuses.<sup>6</sup> Although his discussion was restricted to the United Kingdom, such commodifying processes are perhaps even more easily attested in the United States. One could point to the fact that the football coach will likely be the highest paid university employee, that the level of alumni donations (itself a hugely successful and highly commodified phenomenon) can be related to the performance of that football team, and that one of the criteria that *US News & World Report* uses in its annual rankings of colleges and universities is simply the total amount of money they have in their endowments. (In 2002, the magazine justified this inclusion by arguing that richer institutions are better able to carry out curricular initiatives by building new laboratories and so on.) The better-known



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universities make substantial profits from licensing the sale of T-shirts, caps, and other items that carry their trademarked names and logos – which in turn has caused student activist groups to protest against the “sweatshop” conditions under which these items may be being manufactured in developing countries. A relevant local development was that in 2001 for the first time car owners in the state of Michigan could buy (for an additional fee) a number plate that featured the name and logo of one of the state’s fifteen public universities – presumably the one with which they had the closest affiliation.

Thus, on the surface, we have the marketization of the U.S. postsecondary sector, with an increasingly corporate administrative structure (such as the proliferation of vice president positions) and with – it is often claimed – an increasing detachment of the professorial faculty from major decision making. This often has been accompanied by language that emphasizes “reenvisioning,” “remissioning,” or “reengineering” (Connell & Galasinski, 1998) and by a shift in curricular perspective to the needs of the students (now seen as “customers”) as opposed to the scholarly expectations of a discipline or the traditional offerings of a department.

However, critics of Fairclough and others in the Critical Discourse Analysis movement have pointed to selectivity in the texts chosen for analysis and a *modus operandi* that assumes a monolithic structure (and an accompanying univocal set of attitudes) in the institution under scrutiny.<sup>7</sup> Insider views, in contrast, tend to produce a more complex and messy picture. While my current institution, the University of Michigan, makes use of its reputation in many highly successful ways, it also continues to invest considerable resources in activities that cannot conceivably offer much “return” on that investment, such as the teaching of languages such as Sumerian, Coptic, and Sanskrit. My own investigation into the operations of the University of Michigan Herbarium (with its collection of 1.7 million dried botanical specimens) likewise shows that this unit maintains a very traditional scholarly profile and would seem little affected by trends toward marketization and commodification. As it happens, one of the major roles of the herbarium is to loan out specimens on request to botanists working in other institutions. According to the collections manager, these typically number between sixty and ninety loans a year, ranging in size from a single specimen to upward of two thousand specimen sheets. Before dispatch, all these sheets are carefully checked, laboriously repaired or remounted if necessary, and scrupulously assembled and packed. Further, these loans are long-term and are expected to be retained elsewhere for a *minimum* of two years. Why then should herbaria, in these market-driven times, involve themselves in such time-consuming and apparently unrewarding activities?

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Here is the business manager's answer in an interview:

One of the things that the herbarium really gets out of this loan activity is that the specialist looks at the specimen, and the specialist puts a name on it. Now we have a more valuable specimen because we have got an authority to say what this specimen really is.

As I wrote in *Other Floors, Other Voices*:

These minute accretions of knowledge tokens, as witnessed by expert hand-written nominal annotations, thus underpin, if perhaps precariously at the end of the 20th century, the whole laborious merry-go-round, of assembling, repairing, dispatching, receiving, unpacking, checking and re-integrating loans. (1998: 56)

Such professional services are thus primarily recompensed with payments in attributed *names* rather than in money or even in those expressions of scholarly gratitude one finds in acknowledgments or prefaces. This kind of conventional arrangement seems a very far cry from the forces toward commodification that might be increasingly common in other parts of the institution. The systematic biologists who pass much of their time in the herbarium mostly use hallowed methodologies and often rely on reference works produced decades ago; in my considerable experience of them, they seem essentially immured from the influences of academic and educational fashion and fancy, even though they may be paying a certain price for these rectitudes.<sup>8</sup> In some contrast, Michigan's Business School, like many others in 2000, rushed, in response to the rapid rise in technology stocks, into providing new MBA courses in "e-commerce," the enthusiasm for which has already waned and been replaced, following the business scandals of 2002, by new courses on "business ethics."

Overall then, if there are trends toward commodification, there are also some areas of university activity that are little affected by such trends. Another sign of this is that promotional elements in postsecondary contexts are often treated with considerable ambivalence. Connell and Galasinski (1998) investigated mission statements (presumably a promotional genre *par excellence*) produced by U.K. higher education institutions and concluded:

The Mission Statements did not always, nor did they only, set out to represent academic affairs as "business-like." There is evidence that the Statements both acknowledged *and* negotiated the political-ideological context. In some cases, at least, while they made lexical concessions to what may be regarded as commercial discourses, they still represented core academic affairs much as they have always represented them. (original emphasis) (p. 476)

This ambivalence plays out in many ways. Here is but a single and local instance. My college offers an Honors Program for outstanding