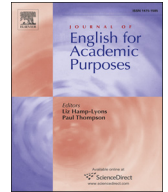


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Genre performances: John Swales' *Genre Analysis* and rhetorical-linguistic genre studies

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ABSTRACT

Although scholars have studied some sources of variation within genres, the variation that is each individual performance of a genre requires further investigation. In *Genre Analysis*, John Swales combined rhetoric and linguistics to explain genre as grounded in shared communicative purposes and discoverable through text analysis. Although the disciplines differ in some of their purposes and settings, they share the difficulty of helping students advance beyond simplified understandings of genre to the complex decisions needed to address particular situations. Building from a rhetorical-linguistic genre studies and using metaphorically the linguistic concepts of competence and performance, this article proposes that genre theory and instruction should account for genre performances as well as genre competence. Genre theory can then better address such issues as identity, affect, and cognition. Genre instruction can lead students to examine not just similarity within a genre but also differences, in both communicative event and individual language-users. The uniqueness of each performance also affects assessment of genre knowledge and transfer, complicating the ability to assess genre competence through genre performance. Considering genre performances as well as competence within a rhetorical-linguistic genre studies allows genre scholars and teachers to address the fact that genre-in-use is simultaneously unique and shared.

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Scholars within genre studies have investigated many sources of variation within a genre. While still based theoretically in understandings of the shared nature of genres—whether shared social actions (Miller, 1984), communicative purposes (Swales, 1990), or social processes (Martin, 1997)—genre scholarship has demonstrated that texts within those genres vary in their prototypicality (Paltridge, 1997); across dimensions of textual clusters (Biber, 1988); by discipline (Hyland, 2012; Soliday, 2011); and historically (Bazerman, 1988; and many others). Research on genres in the schools has found that students' genre knowledge and acquisition vary, among other things, by socio-economic class (Myhill, 2005; Spinillo and Pratt, 2005). An individual's patterns of variation across texts have been described as well, in every literary or rhetorical study of an author's style but notably also in linguistic studies of individual personas (Hyland, 2010, 2012). At times, scholars refer to particular “performances” of a genre (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010) or “performing” identity within disciplinary conventions and community repertoires (Hyland, 2010). All such scholarship recognizes and helps to account for the variation that necessarily occurs every time someone performs a genre in a particular text. At the heart of all such variation is the fact that genres are at once shared and unique. Each performance of a genre demonstrates its degree of prototypicality, disciplinary membership, historical moment, authorial identity, and many other qualities shared with other members of its category. Yet all of those sources of variation gathered together cannot account for the unique text that an author performs in a unique moment in a unique rhetorical situation, its unique action carrying out a unique communicative purpose through a unique process. In the end, each text is a unique performance. Stated so simply, the idea seems commonplace. Of course each text is unique. Literary

scholars and rhetorical critics have been acting on that fact for many decades. In this article, I want to explore the implications of the uniqueness of genre performances for our scholarship in genre studies and, especially, for our teaching. Every time a writer writes, whether in our courses or afterward, that writer performs a unique action in a unique moment in a unique rhetorical situation, to carry out a unique communicative purpose through a unique process. Students could benefit from instruction in not only the shared genre-ness of that writing but also the uniqueness of what they must actually perform.

The preceding paragraph offers a unique introduction, one never performed before, but an introduction that follows the rhetorical moves of a research article as elaborated by John Swales in his influential work *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Swales' Create a Research Space (CARS) model describes the rhetorical moves typical in introductions to research articles (140–145). In the case of the introduction to this particular article, the first paragraph begins by

- Move 1 “Establishing a territory” through “Claiming centrality,” “Making topic generalization(s),” and “Reviewing items of previous research”: “*Scholars within genre studies have established...and many other qualities shared with other members of its category.*”
- Move 2 “Establishing a niche” through “Indicating a gap”: “*Yet all of those sources of variations gathered together cannot account for...*”
- Move 3 “Occupying the niche,” through “Outlining purposes: “*In this article, I want to explore the implications of...*”

The description of rhetorical moves illustrates the beauty of genre analysis, at least as practiced by Swales with his powerful blend of linguistics and rhetoric. Studying multiple examples of a genre can lead to discoveries of textual patterns. Interpreting those textual patterns as purposeful can lead to insights about rhetorical strategies. Combined, the resulting linguistic and rhetorical genre description has become a primary way of studying and teaching academic genres, especially but by no means exclusively to non-native speakers. Before I argue later in this article that genre studies should pay more attention to unique performances as well as those patterned rhetorical strategies, I want to call attention to Swales' own rhetorical move in having solidified and established within English for Academic Purposes that combined approach to genre—Rhetorical-Linguistic Genre Studies.

In order to illustrate the nature and necessity of that move to combine rhetoric and linguistics in the study of academic genres, I call attention first through an unconventional move for an article: a personal history. In 1982, I completed my Ph.D. at the University of Michigan in English Language and Literature, specializing in English language and composition studies. I had taken courses in Linguistics, too, including an influential one from Robert Bley-Vroman in which I had chosen to analyze the structure of introductions in *Scientific American* articles (an initial glimmer of my future interest in genre study). Two years later, my dissertation almost accidentally discovered genre as a significant variable (see Devitt, 1989). In my quantitative study of how Scots-English language standards changed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I controlled for genre, along with medium and audience, in an effort to control for textual differences. My results showed, surprisingly, that genre (but not audience or medium) was as significant a variable as time: that the language features varied just as much across different genres in the same time period as they did across 140 years of language change. And the process of language standardization happened in different patterns, at different rates, in different genres. To try to explain why genre would have been so important to the historical changes in specific linguistic features, I drew on my knowledge of rhetoric. The different genres represented not just different texts but different contexts, I argued, with different purposes and settings as well as audiences. From 1982 to 1985, I presented the results of my research at the Modern Language Association conference and the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and I published a book solidly framed within linguistics with Cambridge University Press (Devitt, 1989), but I struggled to find a happy disciplinary home for my discoveries about genre as both linguistically significant and rhetorically meaningful.

Unfortunately for me, John Swales first taught at Michigan in 1985, three years after I graduated. Fortunately, in that same year, 1985, I discovered Carolyn Miller's (1984) article “Genre as Social Action” in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, which connected genre to semiotics and to recent work within rhetoric and communication studies. When, in 1990, I discovered in the campus bookstore Swales' contribution to the Cambridge Applied Linguistics series, *Genre Analysis*, my work found a second home. Twenty-five years later, my work is established within the Miller-derived tradition of Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS), but it remains colored by the Swales-derived work in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Occasionally, in the past, someone would mention that my work is a linguistic version of RGS—not surprising considering my upbringing in English language studies as well as composition. But I don't hear that comment as much anymore. I think that's because of the enormous influence of John Swales' Rhetorical-Linguistic version of genre studies (RLGS?).

Today, genre studies encompasses both rhetoric and linguistics,¹ thanks in part to Swales having made such powerful links between the linguistic patterns of genre and communicative purpose, discourse community, and rhetorical moves. Recent discussions at the international conference Genre 2012 and other forums have brought together scholars from different traditions of genre studies, who are recognizing how much we have in common and how much we have to learn from one another. John Swales' *Genre Analysis* has led and enabled such collaboration across disciplines. Swales' influence on genre

¹ Genre studies encompasses pedagogy as well as rhetoric and linguistics, and I will comment on the pedagogical application later in this article. To continue my own textual history, I would point to my discovery of the 1987 Australian collection *The Place of Genre in Learning*, edited by Ian Reid, which Sigmund Ongstad kindly sent me after the first genre conference in Ottawa in 1992.

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