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Genres on the move: Currency and erosion of the genre moves construct

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a reflection on the impact of the formal dilution of the moves construct, which in certain settings may question genre integrity and status and affect the cohesion of disciplinary communities. It reviews the factors of generification, commodification, technology and globalization that nowadays rule the communication of science and discusses two instances of moves erosion in engineering contexts, namely the features and effects of the teaser-abstracts published by a trans-national engineering association and the repercussions of graphical abstracts within a small multidisciplinary community of engineering teachers. With this purpose, corpus analysis and interviews have been conducted to determine moves trends and informants' reactions. Findings suggest that the moves fuzziness caused by abstract abridgement and the graphic rendering of abstract concepts may strengthen or weaken communal boundaries and pose difficult challenges to both insiders and outsiders. To solve them, the case is finally made for a (re-)education of students, academics and professionals by means of a blended framework that instills a looser conception of genre and community, together with a visual literacy or graphicacy that facilitates interpretation, and for a more pedagogical and firmer gate-keeping concerning graphical abstracts.

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Do genres really evolve? This significant question was posed by Carolyn Miller (2012) in her plenary talk at the international conference *Rethinking Genre 20 Years Later*, held at Carleton University (Ottawa). The answer is yes, incontestably: scholarly practices change over time to fulfill new social and epistemological demands, as does the scientific discourse used to express them, both linguistically and rhetorically. Studies showing these specialized changes include, among others, Banks (2008) diachronic studies, Gotti's (2008) monograph on specialised language in general, Gillaerts' (2014) investigation into the use of metadiscourse in abstracts, Bondi's (2014) cross-disciplinary tracking of authorial voice markers in this same genre along two decades, or the analyses of the scientific essay's progress across centuries by Bazerman (1988), Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995, chapter 2), Atkinson (1999), Valle (1999), Gross, Harmon, and Reidy (2009) and Salager-Meyer, Alcaraz Ariza, and Luzardo Briceño (2012) regarding style, presentation and argument. And a quick glance at the patented inventions compiled online by Google will show that, like the research article (their counterpart genre), patents have also developed from an epistolary format into a more impersonal type of document where an abstract is embedded.

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The crux of the matter, however, is not so much whether genres evolve, but rather in which direction, when variation becomes mutation and who is to determine this, how many generic components must change and in what degree to alter the genre and, most importantly, how the idea of genres as dynamic "categories in transition" (Silver, 2006, p. 31) can be compatible with the notions of integrity and taxonomy behind Genre Theory. Dynamism is a fundamental property of genres (Devitt, 1993; Kress, 2010; Miller, 1984) and precisely one of the five tenets of Berkenkotter and Huckin's (1995) theoretical framework, together with cognitive situatedness, the interaction of content and form, a dual structure that permits the creation and reproduction of social organizations, and community ownership. In this paper I reflect on some of these issues while examining the transformations undergone by an increasingly less regulated cross-disciplinary genre, the abstract, a key screening device extensively studied by Swales and Feak (2000, 2009) and "a potential strategy for generic change" (Pérez-Llantada, 2013, p. 221) in its recent graphical version. Far from contending that the formal dissolution of the rhetorical structure of genres (in other words, of their linearity or 'stagedness') will lead to the ontological disintegration of the genre construct, I predict that stagedness will cease to be a primary generic trait, which will bring about two consequences: one is that to define genre we will have to shift our focus from textual representations to non-textual social practices. The other is that since genre and situation are mutually constructive (Devitt, 1993), neophytes will have to rely on knowledge resources other than texts to learn the practices of their communities, as we will see in the last section of this paper. I have organized my reflection into three parts: in the first one I shall review the social agents behind the formal erosion of moves in certain genres. In the second I shall examine two instances of moves erosion (those of abridged and graphical abstracts), and in the third and last section I shall draw conclusions and propose lines of action.

1. Background: the formal erosion of the moves construct

Swales' (1990) IMRD/C moves construct[1] (introduction > method > results/product > discussion/conclusion), which mirrors the prototypical structure of the scientific article, has served as a meeting point for the three traditional approaches to genre: Systemic-Functional Linguistics, English for Specific Purposes, and the New Rhetoric. For the first of these currents, moves have reflected the staged nature and goal-orientation of the text, whereas for the second they mean a steady organizational structure leading to stability in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) with shared communicative goals and certain standards of professional competence. For the third, moves are indicators of the regularities in situated activities across social, cultural, and institutional contexts. In those recurring activities, the conflation of "private intentions and social exigence" remarked by Miller (1984/1994, pp. 37) has paved the way for research into genre interdiscursivity, flexibility and appropriation (Bhatia, 2004) and raised critical questions related to the role of context and power. Along this line, Hyland (2004, pp. 38–41) suggests delving into how some genres become respected and are granted esteem, who gets accepted/excluded or empowered/oppressed through genre literacy and in whose interest, and who can challenge and manipulate generic conventions and for what. Since the last decade, however, we have been witnessing a gradual dilution of one of those conventions, moves structures, in certain genre texts, which has caused substantial diversification and hybridization and therefore questioned their integrity (Bhatia, 2004)—even their very generic status. Would the disintegration of the moves construct imply a loss of connection between the three traditions?

Genre variation, Hyland (2000/2004) reminds us, is caused by the manipulation of conventions by practitioners within the community's boundaries (by the repeated action of influential gatekeepers more than by that of ordinary members) and by sociocultural changes and large-scale developments in the disciplines. These social phenomena, of an economic and geopolitic nature and a broader and more rapid impact, consist in or have been triggered by, according to Swales (2004), four major contemporary trends: *generification, commodification, technology*, and *globalization*. Generification can be defined as the proliferation of genres to meet concrete administrative and academic requirements and as their subsequent association in hierarchies, chains, sets, and networks or systems. For example, Gross et al. (2009) document how the first abstracts were published in the early 1920s, encouraged by an editorial in the *Astrophysical Journal* and aimed at saving the readers' time and effort. Today the research article and the verbal abstract are chained genres in a vast network of academic texts (e.g. monographs, conference presentations, etc.), and graphical abstracts are becoming a part of the genre sets of some scientific fields getting chained to their verbal equivalents (although their actual equivalence is often dubious). As for commodification and globalization, they are intimately linked: globalization is "an umbrella term to capture communication phenomena" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 50) and is characterized by a "trans-national interconnectedness" and "a tremendous affluence of information" (Blommaert, 2005, pp. 36; 176) supposed to constitute a generalized economic progress—in our globalized context corporations operate as if the world was one large market.

Commodification is understood as the marketization of human activities traditionally not profit-oriented (e.g. science, education), which turns their discourses into "commodifying objects" (Pérez-Llantada, 2012, p. 47) with socio-economic and institutional values attached. Scientific discourse, for instance, has lately intensified its persuasive goal and might end up as

[1] I consider the informational sequence IMRD/C a moves construct and not merely a 'sections' construct of research genres because it is iconic of any real-life scientific procedure (i.e. detecting a knowledge gap, weighing up—and occasionally stating overtly—its importance as object of investigation, consulting and evaluating literature on the subject and discussing standard practices, devising or adopting a method and implementing it, collecting data, and finally interpreting them). In the text, though, the narrative of these staged actions may vary with disciplinary cultures and at personal convenience: for example, it is not strange to find 'regressions' to the methods section when describing the results, and the purpose of the study may be reminded of in the final discussion or conclusion.

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