

**JOHN M. SWALES**

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**An overview of genre analytical studies  
in English for Academic Purposes**



Thanks to a Morley Scholarship from the University of Michigan, I happened to meet the well-known Professor John Malcolm Swales at the English Language Institute of Michigan University in summer 2003. My own interest in genre analysis and in English for Academic Purposes led me to contact him for an official interview. In addition to being a very prolific researcher as well as guest speaker in numerous foreign EAP symposia, his work at the Institute ranges from discourse courses for linguistic majors and courses in dissertation writing, to advising postgraduates and visiting scholars. But what surprised me most was his generosity towards both colleagues and students. I must thank him for encouraging active research through thought-provoking meetings, for his illuminating advice and comments and, why not, for his well-known sense of humor, which makes people feel comfortable and relaxed while doing intense research at the Institute.

I am sure many *Ibérica* readers will have met John Swales in ESP Conferences in Spain, in Europe and all around the world. However, considering the scope of this journal, I thought it would be interesting to share Swales's views on the current status of genre studies in English for Academic Purposes and in English for Specific Purposes at the beginning of the new millenium. I must also thank the editor of *Ibérica* for his interest in my proposals when planning the interview.

**CP:** Before we start, I think it would be interesting if you could give us a brief profile of your academic and professional trajectory –from your beginnings to your current work at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan.

**JS:** I did an undergraduate degree many years ago in Psychology at Cambridge and then I taught for two years in an Italian university and one year in Sweden, and then

I went for two years to the University of Libya in Benghazi. I came back and did an advanced diploma in ELT and Linguistics at Leeds. I went back to Libya, where I first became really involved in ESP because I was in charge of English in the College of Engineering. I then went back to Britain. I got a job as a lecturer at Leeds University, but it was teacher training and I didn't like it very much. So I went back to the Sudan for five years as a professor and then I got a readership at Aston, which took me from 1978 to 1984, and at the end of 1984 I came to the University of Michigan to be Director of the English Language Institute and I have been here ever since. So nearly twenty years.

**CP: Right, in 1990 –nearly fifteen years too– you published your well-known work *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*, a book which gave you international recognition as the ‘father’ of genre analysis. How have genre studies evolved since then?**

**JS:** Well, I don't know whether I can give a very considered answer to that, but you could say a number of things. First, genre studies have very much increased in number, as you well know from Spain and the number of people who do genre-based studies in Spain, and in Scandinavia and in a number of other places. The second thing is that we have moved away from taking a single genre in a single discipline to doing comparative studies across disciplines –and here the work of Ken Hyland I think comes first to mind–, and then doing comparative or contrastive studies across different languages. It was really only with Ulla Connor's book that we began to see the importance of comparing the same genre across languages, rather than comparing one kind of text in one language with a different kind of text in another language, which of course was where Kaplan started. I think, if you want me to go on, I think that a lot of people now talk about situated genre analysis, by which they mean not just merely analysing the text, but certainly involving the authors, or sometimes the readers of the texts. And you notice that in recent years Ken Hyland stopped doing just pure textual analysis and now incorporates interview data.

There are other kinds of contextualization that have taken place. Perhaps we see more of those in the area of business communications, where there's a clear sense that corporate culture is a more important variable than it might be in a university culture. I mean I would guess that across much of Spain in the state universities there is the same kind of culture; so if you go to Valencia or to Barcelona the differences

are not so great. If you went to a place like ESADE in Barcelona, which is a private institution, it may be different, but if you go from one big company in Spain to another big company in Spain, then I would think that the way they proceed, the way they handle documentation, the way they talk, the way they dress, all these things are not the same. So I think it has been business communication that is kind of taking the lead in some sense, putting genre study into institutional structure. And one final thing, if you want one more thing, is that in the last five years, there has been the increasing availability of corpora and of concordance programs. And that's another aspect of genre analysis that I think many people are still struggling with.

**CP: As genre theory has become more complex –as you claim in Askehave & Swales (2001)– the concept of communicative purpose has become more complex too, right? So, in the review of genre status, can you explain the new roles of communicative purpose, textual features and rhetorical features? Let me quote your own words; you said that “we need more socio-cognitive input that the text itself provides” (1993: 690). Can you explain this a bit further too?**

**JS:** Well, that's a nice way of putting it! In fact there is a little background to this story. I went in 2000 to be a visiting professor in the business school in Aarhus in Denmark. It was my first time in a business school and of course it was very much multilingual. And one of my new friends there was Inger Askehave, who had recently done her PhD on company brochures. And what she said in the PhD was that the ostensible purpose of these brochures was to sell the products –whatever they were. But in fact, she discovered that the real purpose of these brochures was to try and identify suitable business partners. So what they were looking for by sending their brochures from Denmark into Germany was not to sell the Danish things that they were making, but to find a German company who would act as the import agent because there was a good mix. And she said that there was nothing on the surface that anybody would ever see that would identify this underlying purpose. It was not that they kept it hidden, not that they had a secret kind of devious Machiavellianism. It was just the way that this genre had evolved, and so she argued that we can't use communicative purpose as a sorting mechanism at the beginning. This won't work because we then discover that those communicative purposes are not accurate; so we can't use them as a classifying mechanism. And I read a PhD and an article that she published in the good little journal *Hermes* and I said “well, if you can beat them, let's join them.” And she needed to have some publications in big journals and so I said

“well, why don’t we work together on an article for *Applied Linguistics*?” So that was the outcome, and we finished up with this idea of ‘repurposing’ the genre and this idea is in my new book, although one of the external reviewers didn’t like the term at all. He wanted me to take it out, but it is still there!

**CP: It seems genre theory uses the basic tenets of systemic functional linguistics, namely that the cultural and situational context adds meaning and purpose to a text. Does your concept of ‘genre’ differ from the one systemic functional linguists have?**

**JS:** No, actually it doesn’t. When I first studied systemic functional linguistics with Michael Gregory in the 1960s, genre was never mentioned; it was only register. I don’t think myself that Halliday has ever been comfortable with the concept of genre, because I think he believes that when you talk about genres you have to be talking about people’s intentions, and he doesn’t believe that’s a proper role for linguists to get involved in. Psychologists, theologians, sociologists may be, but linguists should focus on what’s there. So I took actually my initial thoughts about genre from literature and more particularly from anthropology, from Malinowski, Clifford Geertz and people like that, because some of the cultural anthropologists were some of the first people to explore non-literary genres –you know, particular kind of ceremonies, rituals, tribes and that kind of thing. So I took it from there. And also I think I have to say that, although systemic functional linguists are always talking about the importance of context of situation, they very rarely actually examine it in any detail. Actually they tend to be very much text linguists, grammarians and so on; and not ethnographers. It is very hard to find a systemic linguist who pays more than lip service to the social conditions.

**CP: In your view, what theoretical approaches or disciplines are more suitable to work with genre analysis? And where does the relevance of genre analytical methodology lie for all these approaches?**

**JS:** Well, I think that’s very much up to the individual. I mean I wouldn’t like to legislate. Let me put it this way. How much of the history of the genres do you need to know to understand how a genre manifests itself today? Now, there have been a number of important studies on the evolution of genres, Charles Bazerman’s pioneering study, Françoise Salager-Meyer has done a lot of work on this, Dwight Atkinson has done some work, other people have done some work. I think it’s a matter of cost and time-

effectiveness. How much you would learn if you studied the history of emails, for example? Or could you just say *‘that might be nice to know, but it’s not worth my time to spend all that extra time in discovering this.’* So I think these kinds of things are very much an open question. Although I enjoy reading people who write about the history of genres, and I think it can be quite revealing, I’m not sure for an applied linguist rather than a historian of science, it is really worth the effort. Let me add another thought. I think we should do what we do best and if some people are very good at grammatical analysis, let them do grammatical analysis. And some people have got an intuitive sense of what makes a good example for teaching purposes, so let them do that. I usually try to encourage my students to maximize their talents.

**CP: Research in EAP seems to be moving from written genres towards spoken ones. Do you think EAP teachers should then forget about teaching a written grammar of English and rather provide students with a comprehensive spoken grammar of the language?**

**JS:** No, I don’t think so at all. I think that the written grammar underlies so much literacy, both reading and writing, and underlies so many of the other things that they want to read, or the things that are read aloud like the news that are scripted. So, my own sense is that students need to know the written grammar. Then you might have a small kind of component focusing on where the spoken language is different from the written language. So perhaps you wouldn’t need to re-do the whole tense system to deal with business speech or academic speech, but you might just concentrate on the spoken side on something like *“I was wondering whether you might like to have lunch one day next week”*, where that use of the past continuous is of course a distancing device and is nothing to do with time. And so I think those are features that you could pick out. But I don’t see –although I’m faculty advisor of MICASE– I don’t see throwing written grammar out.

You know, there is a very interesting paper in this good language conferencing book by Irena Vassilieva. I think she’s Bulgarian but works in Germany. She did a study of Bulgarian academics speaking in English in European conferences, and she argued very strongly and very persuasively that if you’re a non-native speaker and you’re at a conference, it’s perfectly okay to speak a rather more formal, bookish kind of English, and not attempt to do the informal, more colloquial stuff that comes naturally to native speakers. I think that’s fine. I’ve never been upset or had a bad opinion of a non-native speaker because they spoke more formally than the people

around them. I think that's natural and easier to do this, and it means they're possibly clearer. It is also less risky; y. You use lots of slang expressions and idioms and you're going to use one wrongly and everybody's going to giggle, right?

**CP: I know you are currently working with corpus-based methodology. What are the advantages of carrying out research using language corpora and, more specifically, of using an academic corpus such as the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE)?**

**JS:** Well, I don't know what the advantages are actually. My own experience is that I can spend a lot of time not getting anywhere. I can look –scroll up and down– lots of screens hoping that some magic explanation is going to emerge and 96 times out of 100 it doesn't. And, you know, I'm a full professor so I don't do a huge amount of teaching. I teach six hours a week during the academic year. True I do most of my own materials, but I teach only six hours a week. Somebody teaching twelve, eighteen hours –perhaps more normal loads for lecturers– doesn't have the time to spare and to waste fiddling around with corpus linguistics. So I think as a way of mapping the verbal world, it's actually not a very productive technique. But it is very productive if you know what you want and you want to find an example of it. If you know that you need to discuss a particular form of verb complementation, when people say '*try to write*' as opposed to '*try writing*', then having the right corpus, you can immediately get very good examples. So that's a great advantage. Another great advantage is as a way of testing out what other people have said. If somebody else says that *might* is commoner than *may* in academic speech, well, with the corpus, the right corpus, I can tell you the answer whether that's right or not in five minutes, whereas if I had to hand count everything from the transcripts it would take me five months. So, there are some advantages but I also think there are some difficulties. I don't know what your experience has been but for me it's two magic bullets in the gun –it's not six in the revolver. Some of them are not going to work. The other problem is that although corpus work is very good at the microlevel –you want to find the prepositions which go with this verb– it's difficult to keep sight at the same time of the major discursal episodes that are taking place. And in fact one of the great advantages of the MICASE corpus on the website is that you can just press a button and you can see the whole transcript, which of course is something you can't do with the other corpora.

**CP:** In Simpson & Swales's introduction to *Corpus Linguistics in North America. Selections from the 1999 Symposium* (2001) you describe the current

**status of corpus studies in this country. Can you summarise or provide a general overview of it? And can you compare it with the development of corpus linguistics in Europe?**

**JS:** Yes, but I wouldn't say that I know everything. For example, information about the American National corpus is hard to get, and it is a little unclear as to how well that is being developed. I would think that outside a few places at present, one of the major uses of corpus linguistics has been in historical studies of the English language, where the Americans and the Scandinavians share quite a lot in common. And in fact the Helsinki Corpus of Middle English is on the same large website as MICASE. So what we have at the moment is a small group of enthusiasts with groupings in Northern Arizona, in California, in Boston, and in Michigan. But I would think that the number of students who are taking, say, a masters degree in applied linguistics in the United States and who are doing corpus linguistics is no more than 5%. The great majority I would think of masters programs do not yet require students to experiment with corpus linguistics. So the US is clearly behind Western Europe and particularly behind Scandinavia. In fact, I was told the other day by somebody who's from Scandinavia, that it's almost impossible to do a PhD. in English studies in Scandinavia without doing corpus linguistics.

**CP:** All right, let's move now to the scope of corpus based analyses and applications. In your article "Integrated and Fragmented Worlds. EAP Materials and Corpus Linguistics" (2002) you provide some hints to bridge the gap between empirical and pedagogical approaches to corpus analyses. What are your suggestions to bridge such gap? And can you suggest any relevant work from current research, even from your own research?

**JS:** I actually quite like that article, but in my new book I have written something about my being overcritical, or maybe I overemphasised the difficulties of doing corpus linguistics. But as I said in answer to the previous question, the bridge between the descriptive and the pedagogical are things like finding examples and giving students bits of corpus linguistics data, and asking them to try and work out what's happening. But when I am teaching my dissertation writers from all the disciplines, I don't give them –as you might say– raw corpus data where sentences begin in the middle or begin with one letter from a word. I think that you can do this with linguistics students because they are easy to train, but with engineers and so on to get them to focus on reading from the middle of the sentence outwards is actually not what you want to do.

So I edit and I change the concordance lines to make them easier or more transparent. And I don't feel at all guilty about doing this. I'm quite happy for pedagogical purposes to say "*this is not exactly what the person said. I left out some 'umbs' but that's all right.*"

**CP:** In my next question I would like to focus a little bit on the pedagogical use of data-driven learning and concordance programs in EAP. Why is it important to use real materials from corpora as a source for classroom applications? and, in your experience, what difficulties you think we can find as EAP teachers when adapting and deriving teaching materials from corpora?

**JS:** I don't even know whether corpus materials are real. There is the fact that they've been recorded and the fact that in the great majority of the cases in corpora people know they're being recorded –there are some early recordings that I suspect would not be allowed now, because they recorded secretly at a dinner table, which is not something you can do in America and publish or do anything with. Secondly, all the corpus materials that I have seen don't tell you very much about hand gestures, paralinguistic features, and smiles and frowns, and you don't get much information about the physical setting, how people are aligned. So, this is not totally authentic real stuff. And of course it is usually transcribed without much attention at the level of intonation or to some other features such as voice quality. So if reality's as a meter thick, what we get is only a slice of reality that is twenty centimetres thick. So we are already losing a lot. As a result, I don't have any problems with, for the ease of reception on the part of my students, going ahead and fiddling with the data some more!

**CP:** Since we are all eager to read and enjoy your current research, can you cite any relevant work on corpus analysis from those you've published or presented recently?

**JS:** Yes I suppose so. I gave a paper at the Siena conference on Evaluation and Academic Discourse. I gave the opening paper, the main paper on academic speech, and this was a comparison between the MICASE data and the Hyland corpus of 80 Research articles, looking at whether academic speech was more evaluative than academic prose and in what way it was and in what way it wasn't. The answer is that "yes," when we speak we tend not to be quite so moderated. In academic speech you can hear an adjective like *weird*, which you don't see in academic prose and where instead you will see *strange*. Jim Martin has got a very nice expression for this. He says –and I'm using his metaphor– in

*academic speech, the evaluative volume is turned up a little but not all the way and not all the time.* So that's one thing. Well, in this new book, which is in press, there is a chapter on the Dissertation Defense in the United States based on the four MICASE transcripts and another one available from the University of Indiana in 1975. I wouldn't say it is a corpus linguistics study, it's more a kind of transcript study. It is mostly a sort of *what is the move structure of this?*, but because it is a transcript in electronic form, if I want to find out which are the common words or if I want to find out some other mechanically-derived features, I can do that too. So I would say that this chapter, and the other chapter in the book that deals with research speech, is not corpus-driven, but it is corpus-influenced.

**CP: What's the name of the successor to 1990 *Genre Analysis*?**

**JS:** Oh, it is called *Research Genres. Explorations and Applications*. I cut it back from academic genres to research genres because, thanks to all you people in Spain and elsewhere, so much has been published recently, so much more literature is available than there used to be when I wrote *Genre Analysis*. So I thought that I could never within a hundred and thirty thousand words –or whatever was the limit from Cambridge– I could never never pack it all in. So I decided just to focus on the research genres and this book doesn't therefore deal with the basic lecture, or the textbook, or with genres that undergrads deal with.

**CP: Well, it seems you're the right person to give us some essential references for people doing EAP and ESP teaching and research. What are they?**

**JS:** Well I think I would say that for EAP, it would be Hyland's (2000) *Disciplinary Discourses* that I would recommend. Not only for its content but for the style in which it is written and the sophistication of the arguments about social constructionism. It's not just how people cite in different fields; it's a very nice integration of the wider picture with the actual linguistic detail. And for ESP I think that the book edited by Catherine Nickerson and Bargiela Chiappini called *Writing Business* (1999) from Longman is also a very interesting book. It shows how far studies of business communication have come in terms of corporate culture.

**CP: I promise this is going to be the last question of the interview since, you know, I could spend hours talking to you! So, let's leave these questions for some other occasion. From the position you hold as the 'father' of genre theory, what**

**do you think the future prospects of genre-analytical studies are? And what are the possible directions that research into academic discourse might take?**

**JS:** Well, I don't think a person who is almost 65 really should answer this question. It really should be for the younger generation to decide which is the right way to go. But I will say that it's actually quite surprising that the genre-analytic approach has lasted for twenty years or whatever. You know in language teaching fashions come and go, but the genre approach seems to have maintained its position. This is especially so in EFL situations, where it has consolidated its grip on the more advanced language teaching that goes on. Which way to go? Well, as everybody knows we don't have very many experimental studies which actually try to answer the question 'Does *the genre-analytic approach work in the classroom?*' We don't have enough studies which say "Well, I used this and then this and which one works better?" So that's a problem.

However, one of the great advantages of genre-analytical studies is that you are not trapped within a narrow world of second language acquisition and teaching and learning, but you intersect with other fields like cultural anthropology, like the sociology of science, like information studies and that's valuable. And I'm glad to see in more and more of the articles in *English for Specific Purposes* or other journals that more and more people are citing people who are not other genre analysts, but doing something else, and I think that's good.

This interview was held on August 10, 2003 at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan. Once again, I should express my gratitude to Prof. Swales for giving us part of his time and for agreeing to be interviewed. I am sure that, like myself, all the readers of *Ibérica* will greatly profit from his broad experience and insights both as teacher and researcher of English.

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