



Persuasive Genres: Old and New Media

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This book attempts to shift the analytical focus of genre analysis from the conventional academic and disciplinary settings to the increasingly prevalent new media contexts of professional communication, examining particularly the creativity of discursive practices embedded in the composition, dissemination and reception of digital persuasive genres. The multidisciplinary and multiperspective analytical techniques adopted by the author make her work a worthy contribution in the field of professional discourse studies which is characteristic of the mixing of micro linguistic analysis and macro social interpretation. Instances of professional communication, as typical specialist-lay social engagements, may be seen as macro social events of a celebrative nature (Goffman, 1981, p. 167), which enable participants to claim, reinforce, and circulate their power, status, prestige, and ideologies. At the same time, each occurrence of professional communication is a language game in which participants act competitively to build their images and identities, to position their interlocutors, and to remain the continuous moving-on of their business at hand. A joint understanding of the macro structural constraints and the micro contingencies of language games is a prerequisite for the successful explanation of professionals' strategic practice of composing texts and achieving communicative purposes. The author of this book demonstrates her skills of balancing the two levels of genre analysis.

There are six chapters in this book. In chapter one, three major traditions of genre analysis (i.e. English for Specific Purposes, Systemic Functional Linguistics, and New Rhetorical Studies) are compared from a historical perspective. In spite of their different theoretical foundations, the three traditions are actually on the same ground as they formulate the definition of genre on the same set of notions, e.g. communicative/social purposes, structural forms, social action, situation, cultural and social contexts, discourse community, and others. Researchers of the three traditions show the same tendency of prioritizing the ethnographic account of genre-

embedded “institutional, professional, and organizational cultures” over “a textual analysis of text belonging to a particular genre” (p. 1). Chapter two reformulates the existing complicated conceptualization of genre analysis into a manual-like framework of four dimensions: 1. acquiring practitioner’s perspective, 2. mapping contexts, 3. seeking move/step patterns, and 4. analyzing linguistic features. First, practitioner’s perspective refers to professionals’ knowledge about the content, rhetorical form, and function of genres, which can be acquired by interviewing with specialist informants or by consulting manuals/guides published by active members of the related discourse communities. Second, by quoting the SFL (systemic functional linguistic) term “contextual configuration” (i.e. field, tenor, and mode) and concentrating on the deconstruction of situational context, the author challenges the tradition of keeping contextual analysis as a purely speculative process and suggests that professionals’ vernacular naming and categorizing of situation types might be a good starting point. Third, the seeking of move/step patterns necessarily involves a circulation among “a mixed bag of criteria” from linguistic features and non-linguistic intuitions (Swales, 2004, p. 229). Analytical attention may be paid first to notable linguistic and rhetorical features, and then provisionally decided labels of discoursal units should be subjected to contextual investigation for re-evaluation. The fourth dimension points out the insufficiency of the conventional statistical description of lexico-grammatical features and claims the necessity of uncovering pragmatic values fulfilled by surface-level textual resources.

The next two chapters apply the framework to the study of two commonly seen persuasive genres (blurbs and reviews) and examine how they have evolved from traditional print genres to new media genres on the internet. The first part of chapter three recalls the origin of book blurbs and discusses a number of macro discursive features unique to this publishing genre. For example, publishing professionals normally treat blurbs as “a form of paratext associated with books but are not part of the text” (p. 47). Also, the limited space of book jackets imposes a strict constraint on the length of blurbs which normally do not exceed 120 words. The second part of this chapter reports the author’s micro analysis of move patterns and linguistic features. Although book blurb moves and the sequence of their appearance vary according to the type, discipline and content of the book they represent, they can be categorized into three broad groups: “Identification and attention-seeking moves”, “Book appraisal moves”, and “Market and author appraisal moves”. All the moves are characteristic of the use of

various evaluative devices, e.g. nominals, adjectives, grammatical intensifiers, repetition, and accumulation (p. 63). In the last and third part of this chapter, the author observes some newly emerging features of book blurbs after their circumstance is transformed from the traditional newspapers and magazines to the currently popular digital media. For example, textual moves of conventional blurbs on the book jackets and publishers' catalogue are replaced with creative graphic frames which are interactive, non-linear, bi-directional and are meant to create chances of convenient online purchasing (p. 79). The deployment of hyperlinks and multi-modal resources on digital platforms makes new media blurbs both a well-informing genre which covers more discursive space to provide sufficient information to customers and a persuasive genre which manages to influence customers' choices.

Following the same analytical procedure, chapter four presents a parallel study of review genre, i.e. book review, movie review, and product review. The author defies the assumption that review writers are disinterested participants who are committed solely to the provision of impartial comments "on the merits and shortcomings of the object that is being reviewed, whether books, films or products" (p. 92). Both informants' accounts and inside documents published by active members of the publishing community acknowledge the prominence of reviewers' promotional agenda of influencing consumers' buying choice of books, films, and products. Further, the author observes that the introduction of this genre to digital media dilutes the privilege of publishing reviews from community experts to ordinary purchasers. Owing to the universal reach of internet, book readers, film viewers, and product consumers are all capable of disseminating their personal voices on web-based platforms. New discursive elements which are not possible in conventional print reviews are also added to digital reviews, e.g. customer identification, date of review, and the verified purchase notification.

Chapter 5 summarizes the necessity of understanding discursive creativity in the analysis of digital persuasive genres. Although the communicative purpose of a print persuasive genre does not change when it reappears in new media context, the characteristics of digital medium (bi-directionality, multimodality, non-linearity, and space-building) do create plentiful opportunities for professional to bring semiotic innovations to genre realizations. For instance, an online feature news article may readily combine editorials, letters to the editor, news reports and many other conventional genres to create a hybrid journalist genre in digital context. In order to

interpret such creative discursive practices, chapter six re-conceptualizes the traditional approach to genre analysis which concentrates on the deterministic identification of communicative purposes, move/step patterns and regular lexico-grammatical features, and then proposes a multi-perspective and multidimensional analytical framework which is more concerned with the exploration of the competitive writer-reader relationship in digital persuasive genres. The author concludes that an awareness of ‘criticality’, as theorized in Bhatia’s theory of Critical Genre Analysis (CGA), is indispensable if genre analysts attempt to demystify how professional writers manipulate the inherently multiple-purposing digital persuasive genres to “negotiate and express their own identities, whether organizational, personal, professional, or social as well as undermine or accommodate identities of readers” (p. 188).

Theoretically, the book is a serious effort of operationalizing genre theory in the field of persuasive discourse analysis. The author’s accessible reformulation of otherwise voluminous discussion of genre theory (e.g. Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990) and her well-supported analysis of two typical persuasive genres (blurbs and reviews) provide an accessible starting point for the design of similar research projects. Analytically, the author’s skillful identification of move/step patterns draws on her rich experience of teaching English for Academic/Specific Purposes courses and can be further used as a guidance for the categorization of clauses, sentences, and paragraphs of other professional genres into meaningful discourse units. Empirically, the comparative analysis of conventional and digital persuasive genres contributes to a deeper understanding of the increasingly popular promotional culture in professional lives. It reminds us of the dual effect of the advancement of media technology. As the general public acquire greater access to specialist texts like book blurbs and product reviews because of the universal reach of internet, they are, at the same time, being exposed to more complicated strategies of “technologisation of discourse” (Fairclough, 1995) which are becoming less and less detectable owing to the increasingly synoptic reading experience created, among others, by the web-based interactive use of fancy multimodal resources.

To conclude, the book provides an exemplary performance-based genre analysis of persuasive discourse. The findings reveal that what professionals bring to the front-stage of persuasive communication includes not only well-planned texts and their textual selves, but also their gender, status, privilege, identity, ideology and other socially formed attributes. The latter group of

text-external elements, though not immediately relevant at first impression, need to be identified and mapped through macro contextual examinations at an early stage of research in order to generate the necessary circumstance for the explanation of the conventional description of surface rhetorical structures and linguistic resources. The author's methodological innovation is of equal significance for the analysis of professional discourses taking place in other institutionalized settings as well, including management, law, education, and medicine.

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