

Genre

The concept of genre has played a significant role in linguistic anthropology since the inception of the field, part of the philological foundation of the Boasian program. The centrality of texts in the Boasian tradition demanded discrimination among orders of texts, and generic categories inherited from the European (especially German) study of folklore served this classificatory purpose. Genre received little critical or theoretical attention in the field, however, until the latter part of the 1960s, under the convergent impetus of ethnoscience, with its analytical focus on indigenous (emic) systems of classification; structuralism, in both its morphological and structural-symbolic guises; and the ethnography of speaking, in which genre served as a nexus of interrelationships among the constituents of the speech event and as a formal vantage point on speaking practice. More recently, the influence of Mikhail Bakhtin on genre as the compositional organizing principle of utterances has given further prominence to the concept of genre in the work of linguistic anthropologists.

Current approaches center on a conception of genre as one order of speech style, a constellation of systemically related, co-occurrent formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse. More specifically, a genre is a speech style oriented to the production and reception of a particular kind of text. When an utterance is assimilated to a given genre, the process by which it is produced and interpreted is mediated through its intertextual relationship with prior texts. The invocation of a *generic* (i.e., genre-specific) framing device such as "Once upon a time" carries with it a set of expectations concerning the further unfolding of the discourse, indexing other texts initiated by this opening formula. These expectations constitute a framework for entextualization, that is, for endowing discourse with textual properties: boundedness, internal cohesion, coherence, availability for decontextualization and recontextualization, and so forth.

The formal relationship implied in the notion of generic intertextuality has pragmatic and thematic correlates as well. The situated production of generically informed discourse indexes prior situational contexts and their constituent elements (e.g., settings, participant roles and structures, scenarios, goals and outcomes, etc.) in which other tokens of the generic type have been employed; genre thus transcends the bounded, locally produced speech event. From this perspective, genre appears as a set of conventional guidelines for dealing with recurrent communicative exigencies—greetings, for example, as a means of establishing interactional access. It would be misleading, however, to assume—as some have done—that there is a one-to-one correlation between genres and speech events. While particular genres may be primarily identified with specific situational contexts of use—for example, curing chants with healing rituals—it is of the very nature of genre to be recognizable outside of such primary contexts. Thus a curing chant may be performed in another context for entertainment, for the pleasure afforded by the chanter's display of virtuosity, or in still another as pedagogical demonstration in the instruction of a novice curer.

In like manner, each genre will be distinguished by its thematic or referential capacities, as a routinized vehicle for encoding and expressing particular orders of knowledge and experience. This thematic orientation to the world is thus part of the indexical field implicated in relationships of generic intertextuality.

Scholars differ on the question of how much of the speech economy of a community is encompassed by genre. Insofar as the concept of genre emphasizes conventionality and textuality, however, there is an operational tendency to restrict the notion to those discursive forms and practices for which conventional expectation and textual boundedness, cohesion, and coherence are relatively and recognizably more apparent.

While generic intertextuality is a means of foregrounding the routinized, conventionalized formal, pragmatic, and thematic organization of discourse, the same relational nexus also suggests that generic convention alone is insufficient to account for the formal-pragmatic-thematic configuration of any given utterance. This is so because the fit between a particular text and the generic model—or other tokens of the generic type—is never perfect. Emergent elements of here-and-now contextualization inevitably enter into the discursive process, forging links to the adjacent discourse, the ongoing social interaction, instrumental or strategic agendas, and other situational and extrasituational factors that interact with generic orienting frameworks in shaping the production and reception of the utterance. These in turn will influence the ways in which the constituent features of the generic framework—formal, pragmatic, thematic—are variably mobilized, opening the way to generic reconfiguration and change. Thus generic intertextuality inevitably involves the production of an intertextual gap. The calibration of the gap—its relative restriction or amplification—has significant correlates and effects. Certain acts of entextualization may strive for generic orthodoxy by hewing as closely as possible to generic precedent and assimilating the utterance to conventional practices for the accomplishment of routine ends under ordinary circumstances. By contrast, widening of the intertextual gap

allows for the adaptation of generic frameworks to emergent circumstances and agendas. Such adaptive calibration may involve manipulation of any of the formal, functional, and thematic elements by which an utterance may be linked to generic precedents. It may also extend to the assimilation of a text to more than one generic framework, drawing upon and blending the formal and functional capacities of each of the genres thus invoked, as when the lowered pitch, falling intonation, measured stress, and moral content of their instructor's speech might lead a student to inquire of a classmate whether they had just heard a lecture or a sermon.

The calibration of intertextual gaps offers a useful vantage point on the ideology and politics of genre. Within any speech community or historical period, genres will vary with regard to the relative tightness or looseness of generic regimentation, but certain genres may become the object of special ideological focus. Prescriptive insistence on strict generic regimentation works conservatively in the service of established authority and order, while the impulse toward the widening of intertextual gaps and generic innovation is more conducive to the exercise of creativity, resistance to hegemonic order, and openness to change. These factors will be closely tied as well to hierarchies of value and taste (which genres are evaluated as relatively higher, better, more beautiful, more moral) and to the social regimentation of access to particular generic forms (who can learn them, master them, own them, perform them, and to what effect).

(See also *codes*, *expert*, *heteroglossia*, *indexicality*, *inference*, *register*)

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