Schema and Genre Theory

- The term genre denotes a distinctive type of text that is organized on the basis of recognizable and therefore potentially classifiable, patterns. Because of their organization in this way, texts are more easily memorized and recalled.

Genre as discourse practice

- In discourse analysis discourse genre involves a wide ranging and varied set of properties.

Montgomery (2007) makes the point as follows.

- A genre of discourse is a specific and recognizable configuration of discourse elements realizing a particular communicative purpose or set of purposes and usually known amongst a large community by a widely shared label, such as advert, sermon, gossip, joke, and lecture. News is one such genre.

- The label is widely understood; and instances of broadcast news are instantly identifiable as such to audiences. Indeed, news has claims to be the most widely dispersed and understood discourse genre of modern times. However, even within this genre, there are generic variations between radio news and TV news and between bulletin news and rolling news.

- And in any case news as genre is woven out of sub-genres such as the news report, the news interview; or the news headline. Indeed, the structural composition of news discourse may be seen in terms of the chaining together of units each of which is realized by a different sub genre.

- Like structure, genre as a concept also faces two ways. The constructional value of each and every element of a work can be understood only in relation to genre. It is genre that gives shape and meaning to … a whole entity, and to all elements of which that entity is comprised.

- Genre is both stabilization or sedimentation of a particular set of discourse practices and the enabling framework from which discursive change and innovation take place. Indeed, a major source of difficulty in identifying and applying the term genre is that some genres, at least, are unstable, in flux, with the boundaries dividing one from another tending to be indeterminate.

- In print journalism, for example, the notion of a 'news piece' is understood as genetically opposed to 'feature'. The latter tends to be longer, less compressed, with less emphasis on current incident, more personal, with more focus on human interest and with greater allowance for the personal viewpoint of the journalist.

- So, genre describes more than a patterned, recurrent configuration of elements or units but also encompasses shared understandings between producer and audiences about forms and the purposes they serve.

- Genre is a set of generative and interpretive procedures, a 'horizon of expectations' against which any specific generic instance must be set.

- While genre is at once the sedimentation and routinisation of a set of practices and a backdrop against which innovation and change take place, it should also be noted that well defined discourse genres such as lecture, the sermon, the debate, legal cross-examination, or the medical consultation are often embedded in strongly institutionalized domains of social life such as medicine, education, law, politics and religion.

- They derive their purpose from their intuitional position, at the same time as being the discursive embodiment of the institution. The productivity of genres, however, also allows for their migration across domains as models for newly discovered communicative purposes. Thus 'the lecture' 'the debate' and 'cross examination' which have all had a life in broadcasting, sometimes become transformed into new genres such as the studio discussion or the political interview.

- Central to Montgomery's argument in the quotation above is the idea of 'shared of understandings between producers and audiences about forms and purposes they serve'. One way of thinking further about how we recognize different text types or media discourses- and can distinguish for example, between a television soap and a documentary- is to investigate what Montgomery describes above as "promises' and 'expectations' in terms of our schematic knowledge.

Schema theory

- Barlett (1932) was one of the scholars to appreciate the importance of schemas, which he described as high level structures that help memorization. In his study of memorizing and recalling stories, Barlett outlined a model of schema theory that brought together earlier thinking in a number of fields, and gave such work an experimental grounding.

- In one experiment, Barlett found that when participants were asked to recall a story they had been given, they changed parts of the story either by 'flattening', 'sharpening' or rationalizing parts of that story. Barlett showed how his informants 'used their own schema as structures of expectation to fill in probable details when recall was partial'.

From Barlett's insights, two related implications in relation to genre follow:

1. Schema theory may help us in understanding how people make sense of texts.

2. Schema may be the psychological basis for our sense of 'promises' and our horizon of 'expectations' when we encounter a text that resembles a type we have encountered previously.

- Put more generally, schema theory applied to the area of language processing describes our mental organization of stereotypical knowledge about patterns in discourse. We rely on such knowledge to help us interpret and understand texts, especially because of our tendency to draw on previous knowledge in comprehension (e.g. using previous understandings of story structure and content when reading a new story as in Bartlett's experiment).

- Mostly, our every day contact with new texts confirms existing schema, in a process known as 'schema preservation' or 'reinforcing'. Occasionally our schemas fail to account for our experience of a text, resulting in 'schema disruption' that follows when existing schema knowledge is challenged. This line of psychological explanation based on schematic knowledge is not confined to text comprehension.

- It is applied and tested in many other fields of perception and understanding. Here, the model provides a basis for understanding how we recognize texts across the many different and rapidly changing forms of media discourse.

- Genre theory
- Genre theory, as described in Daniel Chandler's (1997) study of media and communication, builds on schema theory. In his discussion, Chandler argues that the term genre can be problematic as contemporary theorists tend to describe genres in terms of 'family resemblances among texts rather than definitionally. An individual text within a genre rarely if ever has all of the characteristic features of the genre.

- The family resemblance approach involves the theorist illustrating similarities between some of the texts within a genre. However, the family resemblance approach has been criticized on the basis that no choice of a text for illustrative purposes is innocent and thus such theories can make any text seem to resemble any other one.

- In additional to the definitional and family resemblance approach, there is another approach to describing genres which is based on the psycholinguistic concept of prototypicality. According to this approach, some texts would be widely regarded as being more typical members of a genre than others.

- According to this approach certain features would identify the extent to which an exemplar is prototypical of a particular genre. Genres can therefore be seen as 'fuzzy' categories which cannot be defined by necessary and sufficient conditions.
- The interaction between genres and media can be seen as one of the forces which contributes to changing genres.

- Some genres are more powerful than others: they defer in the status which is attributed to them by those who produce texts within them and by their audiences. As Tony Thwaites et. al. put it, in the interaction and conflicts among genres we can see the connections between textuality and power.

- The key genres in institutions which are primary definers (such as news report in mass media) help to establish the frameworks within which issues are defined. But genre hierarchies also shift over time, with individual genres constantly gaining and losing different groups of users and relative status.

- Jacques Derrida proposed that a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without… a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text.

Hymes's SPEAKING grid

This framework was developed in the field of ethnography of speaking by Dell Hymes. Ethnography of speaking is an approach to discourse that analyses regular and predictable communicative patterns. communicating appropriately means understanding genre and it relies on schematic knowledge.

- The name of Hymes' framework takes the form of a mnemonic: the individual letters that make SPEAKING each represents a component of the scheme.

- S   Setting and scene
- P Participants
- E Ends
- A Act sequence
- K Key
- I Instrumentalities
- N Norms of interaction
- G Genre