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Making and Unmaking the Prospects for Rhetoric

Selected Papers from the 1996 Rhetoric Society of America Conference

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Genre and Social Science: Renewing Hopes of Wingspread

The Wingspread Conference, as represented in *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, struck many prophetic themes. Several are close to my heart: concern for communicative transactions other than the persuasive, an interest in the changing technology of communication, and calls for the rhetoric of science and technology, the rhetoric of the everyday, and the rhetoric of the many institutional and bureaucratic settings of modern society. Speakers at that conference recognized that the complexity of modern differentiated society has created many locales of communication with new dynamics and tasks. Further, several of the speakers, most explicitly Wayne Booth, Wayne Brockriede, and Hugh Duncan, suggested that to understand rhetoric in its new circumstances we take up the tools and knowledge of the social sciences.

There were, to be sure, voices on the other side, arguing for the autonomy and special knowledge of rhetoric, pointing out that rhetoric, long subordinated to the empirical social sciences, has its own special message that needs to be delivered forcefully. I am too much an outsider to communications departments to attempt a survey of the historical and continuing tensions between classicists and moderns. Nor will I attempt to sort how the rediscovery of rhetoric in writing programs—housed within English Literature departments—has reinforced those divisions. Nor will I consider how literary theory's versions of rhetoric have turned the dialogue in different directions; nor will I survey how the social sciences themselves have engaged lines of rhetorical and discursive inquiry.

Rather I will simply present one domain where rhetoric and the social sciences have converged—namely, the study of genre within social action. This convergence has been only partly recognized on both sides, but it is proceeding. From rhetoric's side the initial and key gesture in this convergence was Carolyn Miller's use of Alfred Schutz's concept of social typification in the production and phenomenology of everyday life. Miller built on an already vital concern for genre within speech rhetoric, documented in her article and soon to produce several major volumes such as Campbell and Jamieson's *Deeds Done in Words*. Nonetheless, seeing genre as typified social action had particular hold for writing researchers trying to understand the social location of writing, a problem not nearly as puzzling for students of speech.

For this audience I don't need to rehearse Miller's arguments, the consequent elaborations by others of relations between genre and typified social action, typified knowledge production, typified social relations, and social structure. I might mention, however, that the door for me (as I was already engaged with sociology) was a two-way door, one that helped me see the conceptual resources rhetoric had to offer in unpacking issues in science studies and scientific communication. I also don't need to rehearse how interest in genre spread within writing programs and writing research, perhaps first starting in areas of professional and technical writing (see, for example, the work of Berkenkotter and Huckin; Russell; Journet; Schryer) but now applied to all domains including classroom genres, freshman writing genres, expressive, and humanistic genres (see, for example, the forthcoming volume edited by Bishop and Ostrom).

Early in this exploration of genre as typified social action, there was a mutually discovered intersection with applied linguistics. About fifteen years ago, I heard of the work of John Swales, who used the functional linguistic concept of moves to explore the structure of introductions to scientific articles. I meant to write him, but before I could get around to it, he wrote me. In the applied linguistic specialty of English for Specific Purposes, many have followed Swales's and his students' lead in mapping out the formal structures of genres of professional writing. Other applied linguists, such as Tony Dudley-Evans, Vijay Bhatia, Aviva Freedman, Amy Devitt, Dwight Atkinson, Patrick Dias, Anthony Pare, and Pete Medway, have been developing mixed composition and linguistic elaborations of genre. A further force in this intersection was the more technical elaboration of genre within the Australian Structural Functional Linguistic school, led by Halliday; Hasan, Martin, and Christie particularly concerned themselves with the role of genre in the SFL system and its application to the public schools, arousing more than a little controversy in Australia. Gunther Kress then took the issues back to Britain, but with an interpretation of genre that foregrounds more its relation to both critical linguistics (see also Fairclough) and to American composition expressivist interests. Cope and Kalantzis elaborate this linguistic perspective.

Genre soon formed another bridge with social studies of science, across the notion of social typification as a means of regularizing scientific communication and practice. This occurred within a turn of science studies to discourse analysis as a means of illuminating social constructionism (Latour and Woolgar; Latour; Knorr-Cetina). Among the more radical social-constructivist epistemologists, the recognition and reaction against existing disciplinary genres led to the movement known as new literary forms—essentially sociologists discovering new ways to write that would expose their reflexive understanding of their own work (Woolgar; Gilbert and Mulkay). Historians of science, such as Shapin and Schaffer, and Dear,

influenced by the social studies of science, began looking into the discursive formation of science, and paying attention to the forms of scientific communication. A number of us from rhetoric entered into the dialogue with science studies to examine the activities, social roles, and social mechanisms of controlled conflict embedded within the genres of scientific communication.

Simultaneously with the rhetorical turn of the social studies of science, a number of disciplines in the social sciences took their own reflexive rhetorical turns to evaluate the limitations of their traditional forms of professional discourse. Anthropology (led by such figures as Geertz; Clifford and Marcus; Rosaldo) began a deeply disturbing and broadly influential examination of the genre of ethnography and economics (led by McCloskey; Klamer; Henderson) developed a critique of the narrowly mathematical forms of economic argument as not reflecting the full range of issues at stake.

Anthropologists, building on the longstanding interest in cultural norms and in linguistics, once attuned to the powerful force of genre, began to use genre as a substantial tool in cultural analysis. Bauman, in studying the cultural production of folk tales, explored the implications of genre and made salient the role of genre in prior anthropological work (see Briggs and Baumann). Goffman's ideas of framing and footing and Gumperz's concept of contextualization clue made the link between microinteractional linguistic data and the larger forms of social recognizability realized in genre, a lead that was followed by Hanks and Duranti.

In sociology several lines of work building on Schutz's comments on typification discovered genre and genre-like issues. Schutz's student, Thomas Luckmann (well known for his book with Berger on *The Social Construction of Reality*), came to see genre as one of the primary mechanisms by which we constructed social realities (see Bergmann and Luckmann). In turn his students began to explore the sociological implications of genre (Guenther and Knoblauch). The most elaborate piece of work from this tradition to this date has been Bergmann's *Discreet Indiscretions* that explores the moral and phenomenological dimensions of the genre of gossip.

Ethnomethodology and conversational analysis, again starting with Schutz and the idea of social typification, began examining how we construct and hold ourselves accountable to social forms (see Garfinkel; Sacks). This work has most explicitly touched back on genre in a recent essay by Schegloff that includes comments on how extended turns are produced and recognized through the invocation of perceivable discursive forms, such as jokes that hold the floor until punchlines are reached.

In trying to find a phenomenologically plausible agent-oriented sociology that reconciles microscopic accounts of behavior with macroscopic issues of social structure, an entirely different strain of sociology has developed accounts of typified action that are compatible with an interest of genre—namely

Bourdieu's account of habitus and Giddens' of structuration. While these sociologies themselves have not yet recognized genre as a useful resource, genre studies have found them useful for understanding how individual utterances shaped within generic regularities reproduce and carry forward larger patterns of social organization.

Two more interdisciplinary conjunctions need to be mentioned to fill out the complex of genre studies as they currently stand. The first ties genre studies back to one of their longstanding homes: literary studies. Bakhtin's career-long concern for the ways in which genres represent utterances and recognizable voices within novels led ultimately to his late essay on "The Problem of Speech Genres." That essay in breaking away from the world of literary representation has led to a revivification of genre studies in literature, with the message most explicitly carried by Todorov but also lending weight to the longstanding interest of Ralph Cohen, and recently extended by Beebee. This new literary work is more savvy about the relationship between textual forms, social transmission, individual consciousness, and ideology than prior literary work on genre. The work of Bakhtin also has made the circuit of linguistics, sociology, and anthropology, giving energy and literary panache to genre work in the social sciences.

Finally, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)—building on Vygotsky and other Soviet psychologists but now being extended in relation to organizational theory (Engestrom) and Cognitive Science (Hutchins, Nardi)—has been a useful umbrella for a number of the genre theorists to bring together their observations about genre as a form of social activity that itself helps structure those activities, mediates relationships, and provides tools for the growth of individual cognition. Russell, Freedman, Medway, Dias, Berkenkotter, Prior, Winsor, Blakeslee, and I, among others, have been incorporating activity theory in our work, and genre has become an increasingly visible concept in the activity theory world (most visibly present in the journal *Mind, Culture, and Activity*).

What do we get from this convergence of disciplinary interests over the concept of genre? First, we have more people of different orientations studying different kinds of genres from different cultural locales. We have moved far from the agora and the three genres of epideictic, forensic, and deliberative and far from the standard arrangement of exordium, narrative, proof, and peroration. The scientific article, the ethnography, and the kaffee-klatsch stand beside the Polynesian Laugo, chronicles of colonial Mexico, and the jive-talking put-on. Each has its most salient features, but each also has been examined from the particular perspective of the examiners, exposing cultural, ideological, linguistic, interactional, formal, epistemic, phenomenological, and social structural vitality in the generic utterance. We are seeing more of what is at stake in genre.

The example of genre also suggests how rhetoric stands in the middle of an interdisciplinary study of human life, intertwined, as human life is, with our intentional and reflective use of language. But rhetoric gets transformed as it enters in dialogue with the human sciences, which over the last century have documented and contemplated much about our lives. The last time there was a thoroughgoing attempt to rethink rhetoric in light of our understanding of the human was in the eighteenth century—addressing the kinds of psychological and interpersonal problems posed by Hume, but that initiative ossified as it found temporary answers in sympathy, then sentiment, and then belles-lettristic aesthetics. In this century we have had some sporadic attempts to rethink rhetoric in light of new observations about humans and human society by a few individuals, most notably Burke, but these have been partial and had little systematic impact. They were expressed more in the hopes than in the practice.

Genre's interdisciplinary history suggests how such a rethinking of rhetoric might proceed. The rhetorical tradition contains a series of concepts that point to features of language use that have appeared salient to language users within a group of related cultural traditions. These reflective categories are clues as to what people have made of language and thus provide some strong clues about what language has become. However, these uses of language need to be compared to the explicit reflections on language used in other cultures (as is now beginning in the comparative rhetoric movement) and to the actual practices, whether or not an explicit reflective vocabulary has developed for them and whether or not the practices themselves follow that reflective vocabulary. Then we need to place our understanding of these language practices and reflective vocabularies within a much broader inquiry into the role of language in human life, in its many dimensions. At that point we will be in a better position to examine the relationship between the explicit vocabularies and pedagogies of language use and the actual social practices. And we will be in a better position to develop new reflective vocabularies and pedagogies to fit the changing communicative needs of historically evolving societies.

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Is the Prospect of Rhetoric Antirhetorical? Or Rhetoric's Critical Impulse

I begin with two quotations. The first is from Stephen Spender, written in 1951 and recalling an observation from the 30s:

> To divide humanity into irreconcilable groups with irreconcilable attitudes, having no common language of truth and morality, is, ultimately, to rob both groups of their humanity. They will be inhuman first to one another, and lastly to their own followers. (136)

The second quotation from Todd Gitlin's *The Twilight of Common Dreams* was written last year. After considering the difference between what he calls "the late New Left politics of separatist rage . . . [and] the early New Left politics of universalist hope" (146), Gitlin argues that

> Identity politics confronts a world in flux and commands it to stop. . . . Today, some cultural fundamentalists defend the formulas of "multiculturalism.". . . Other fundamentalists . . . claim that multiculturalism, racial preferences, and the like are instruments of an elite. . . . What frightens both is the flimsiness of a culture where everything is in motion. . . . In the minds of all fundamentalists, porousness makes for corrosiveness. A porous society is an impure society. The impulse is to purge impurities, to wall off the stranger. (223)

Spender's reflection and Gitlin's urgency reflect a concern that has been around for sixty years and more—a concern for communicating across huge gaps of identity, huge chasms of difference.

While neither Spender nor Gitlin was concerned directly or explicitly as a rhetorician surveying the prospect of rhetoric, a similar concern by rhetoricians was present twenty-five years ago in *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, situated chronologically half way between Spender's then and Gitlin's now. Baskerville, for example, raised the specter of communication failed in a violent New-Left noise (152), and Wayne Booth, to cite another example, reflected on a crisis in