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Frow, J. (1980) *Discourse genres*. Journal of Literary Semantics, 9 (2). pp. 73-81.

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Discourse Genres

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I

Recent analysis of discourse has been dominated on the one hand by a formalism which treats the text as an extension of the syntactic and logical structuring of the sentence, on the other hand by an embarrassed empiricism which, in attempting to take into account the role of context and enunciation in the shaping of text, finds itself unable to formalise the infinity of possible speech-situations¹. In both cases the result is a renewal of the traditional dichotomy between text and context or between *énoncé* and *énonciation*, in which only the former is seen as properly linguistic², and the situation of utterance is conceived as contingent, circumstantial, 'subjective', non-systematic.

And yet it is now fifty years since Vološinov/Bakhtin initiated the critique of this splitting of the realm of discourse into disparate logical orders and prepared the ground for a unitary theory of discourse. In writing of the "little *speech genres*" which "operate in extremely close connection with the conditions of the social situation in which they occur and exhibit an extraordinary sensitivity to all fluctuations in the social atmosphere"³, he was proposing the existence of a *structured* set of discourses defined as practices which are coherent organisations-of-content: "Each period and each social group has had and has its own repertoire of speech forms for ideological communication in human behaviour. Each set of cognate forms, i. e., each behavioural speech genre, has its own corresponding set of themes."⁴ The form of communication (the "speech genre"), the form of utterance, and the theme form an absolute unity; and each of these genres is stratified as a social practice through the importance of "language-etiquette, speech-tact, and other forms of adjusting an utterance to the hierarchical organisation of society"⁵. The production of meaning is thus always highly specified by the rules of the discourse structure in which it occurs, and the structure of the genres of discourse is directly correlated with the semiotic constraints of the speech situation.

This intimation of the importance of treating context in terms of its semiotic dimension was not fully taken up until Halliday's development of the concept of *register*. Register or diatypic language variety is "a contextual category correlating groupings of linguistic features with recurrent situational features"⁶, and it can be defined as "the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type. It is the meaning potential that is accessible in a given social context" — a set of semantic options 'at risk' in a particular environment. It can be recognised through its formal characteristics, but its structure is semantic⁷. Thus "the distinction between one register and another is a distinction of *what* is said as much as of how it is said, without any enforced separation between the two"⁸.

The further integration of register with the context of utterance is achieved by conceptualising situation as an abstract representation of relevant contextual categories — that is, by bringing the two concepts to a comparable level of abstraction. At this level it is a question of the situation *type*, which "is, essentially, a semiotic structure. It is a constellation of meanings deriving from the semiotic system that constitutes the culture"⁹. This constellation, the semiotic structure of the situation, can be analysed in terms of the three variables of *field*, *tenor* and *mode*, which "represent in systematic

form the type of activity in which the text has significant function (field), the status and role relationships involved (tenor) and the symbolic mode and rhetorical channels that are adopted (mode). The field, tenor and mode act collectively as determinants of the text through their specification of the register; at the same time they are systematically associated with the linguistic system through the functional components of the semantics¹⁰. In Halliday's terms, field is associated with the ideational function; tenor with the interpersonal function; and mode with the textual function. Field, tenor and mode are not empirical categories; they "are not kinds of language use, nor are they simply components of the speech setting. They are a conceptual framework for representing the social context as the semiotic environment in which people exchange meanings"¹¹, and "they represent the situation in its generative aspect"¹². Although they are not themselves linguistic features, they have direct linguistic consequences: thus field governs lexis; tenor governs mood, modality, and intonation patterns; and mode governs forms of cohesion, patterns of voice and theme, and forms of deixis¹³.

II

The concept of register has so far been used only to describe the complex articulation of particular texts. The logical move from this point is to test the value of the concept for generalisation about the *kinds* of text and the kinds of textual organisation. It is necessary to ask if we can specify a finite number of registers governing the infinity of utterances, to say *what* registers there are (to establish a historical catalogue), and to analyse the obligatory features structuring them and differentiating them (to establish the principles of a structural analysis of discourse). The failure to specify a limited number of historical registers must lead to the implication that they are infinite and indefinite, and if this were the case, the concept would have little operational value.

An important problem in categorising the kinds of register is their heterogeneity. Some sociolects, like political discussion or narrative, are relatively autonomous of a particular situation type, others, like ceremonial discourses (church rituals, laments, investitures, etc.) are closely tied to the form of their occasion. But this heterogeneity can be seen as the result of the constitutively unequal fusion of the functions associated with field, tenor and mode in the complex structure of register, and this means that registers can be categorised according to the *dominance* of one of these variables over the others. Conversely, we can identify registers by the fact that, within this structure-in-dominance, they will possess a characteristic constellation in each of the three areas. This will allow us to distinguish them from organisations of discourse which are *more* general – e. g., from style and dialect, and from the 'universes of discourse', the institutionalised cognitive fields (scientific, philosophical, sociological, magical, technical, theological, instrumental, aesthetic, everyday . . .), each of which subsumes sets of registers – and *less* general – e. g., from speech acts in Searle's sense; from formal structures like the pun or the aphorism; or from highly situational acts like telling off a superior. In this sense my use of the concept of register is more limited than Halliday's because I am restricting it to the major and clearly-defined genres and excluding the nuanced sub-genres, like the range of types of conversation. For the sake of the heuristic value of a formal scheme I wish to stress delimitation at the expense of the real fluidity of utterance within constantly shifting register boundaries. I shall also prefer Vološinov's term 'genre' to Halliday's 'register'; as a musical term this suggests a scale on a single plane, whereas 'genre', borrowed from poetics, implies the unity of multiple convergent planes.

In the following table I have attempted a very rough categorisation to indicate the kinds of discourse genres that we might expect to isolate in an exhaustive and historical description.

Dominance of field	Dominance of tenor	Dominance of mode
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – languages of science and professional jargons (e. g., juridical or medical discourse) – administrative discourse – political debate/discussion – journalesque (and sub-genres) – sports commentary – newscasting – historiography – philosophical dialogue – language of technical analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – face-to-face conversation – invective and boasting – gossip – greetings – language of publicity – language of commercial transactions – prayer – military commands – ceremonial discourse – pedagogic language – in-group jargon – epistolary style – language of showmanship – amatory discourse – labels and notices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – oratory – sermon – cant – natural narratives – sacred or scriptural discourse – parody and impersonation – jokes – graffiti – riddle and word-game – literary and dramatic genres and sub-genres

The complex intrication of field, tenor and mode means that the assignment of dominance is often somewhat arbitrary: jokes and sermons are strongly marked by tenor as well as mode, prayer and military commands are strongly marked by mode, the language of commercial transactions is strongly marked by field. Some of the genres listed – scientific and professional jargons, conversation, literary genres – need to be broken down much further. And literary genres represent an exceptional case in that they can be thought of as secondary stylisations of primary registers, with a doubling of the subject of enunciation and a special kind of closure – but in this their function is not distinct from other ‘non-literary’ ironic or figurative modifications of ‘primary’ discourse genres.

III

In order to undertake a rigorous description of the system of genres of discourse in a given social formation it would be necessary to establish in more detail the logical skeleton which differentiates the structure of these genres. Figure 1 represents an analytic model which seeks to specify the semantic functions (ideational, interpersonal and textual) corresponding to field, tenor and mode. It expresses the minimum number of semantic options giving the *possible obligatory features* of genre, i. e., the minimal set of variables adequate to the description of the distinctive structure of genres. Each genre is characterised by multiple variables, but not all sets of variables are significant for each genre. It would be possible to map out further, more detailed distinctions (e. (e. g., mood and tense for tenor), but in most cases these would not be essential at the level of generality required to distinguish the major genres; conversely, these variables will not provide a complete, only a differential analysis. It is crucial to recognise the constant intrication and inter-implication of field, tenor and mode: thus tenor relates directly to the processes of field and to the situational determinants of mode.

Figure 1



A. Field

1. There is an apparent disjunction in this column between semantic options associated with process (that is, with contexts of saying) and those associated with semantic field and its spatio-temporal organisation. However the concept of process is intended to straddle context and content; it expresses the *meaningful use being made* of areas of meaning.
2. The map of the semantic domain is highly general. The scale of generality can be decreased either by specification of field through combination with features of tenor and mode, or by extending the branches downwards to the level of particularity required.
3. Similarly, the three processes could be subdivided into more specific speech-processes. For example:

<i>instrumental process</i>	<i>cognitive process</i>	<i>experiential process</i>
persuading	informing	reinforcing
ordering	evaluating	devaluing
instructing	enquiring	competing
questioning	debating	fabricating

4. 'Metasemiotic' refers to discourse with a reflexive relationship to the whole realm of meaning systems. It would include philosophical and literary discourse.

B. Tenor

1. The options of rank (to superior/to peer/to subordinate) and formality may carry occasional or prescribed stylistic, lexical or dialectal correlations.
2. The concept of *keying* is taken from Goffman¹⁴ who defines it as a modulation to a secondary framework. He distinguishes five types of key: make-believe; contests; ceremonials; technical redosings; and regroupings. For my purposes I would also include as keying his concept of *fabrication*, the deliberate falsification of a part of the world. This option would cover the distinction between literal and figurative, ironic or mendacious speech.

C. Mode

1. Gregory and Carroll¹⁵ point out the complexity of the distinction between spoken and written discourse and map out the gradations involved in the relative orientation of each towards the spoken or written mode.
2. The distinction of person is placed within mode because it governs rhetorical, i. e., *textual* organisation. The distinction is essentially that between monologue, dialogue and narrative (or a combination of these). Benveniste has made it clear that personal pronouns, tenses of the verb and deixis are realities of discourse¹⁶; relations of person are thus *dramatic* roles specified by and within a 'context of situation' which is embedded in the 'real context'¹⁷.
3. The distinction between elaborated and restricted code (governing the organisation of cohesion) involves choices of decorum (stylistic elevation, hypotactic or paratactic structure) and relation to context (predominantly endophoric or exophoric reference).

These categories will not provide an exhaustive description of a genre; they will allow the selection of those features most relevant to the coherence of a genre. Thus prayer is unified by its address pattern (second person oral to a superhuman superior), by the grammatical and syntactic structures (vocatives, subjunctives, request-structures) corresponding to this authority-situation, and by an appropriate decorum. Legal jargon is characterised by an elaborated, 'written' vocabulary and syntax relating, usually within an institutionalised setting, to a juridical content, combining pragmatic with cognitive processes and dependent on formalised role-relationships etc.

The analytic model has the form of a calculus, but the logical types derivable from it would not necessarily correspond to historical registers. Its purpose is to differentiate, not to produce genre-concepts; and the analysis it makes possible is preliminary to the fuller linguistic analysis which its categories imply.

IV

Discourse genre, or register, is a conventional institution: a normative codification of different levels of meaning appropriate to a type of situation. Todorov remarks that "n'importe quelle propriété verbale, facultative au niveau de la langue, peut être rendue obligatoire dans le discours; le choix opéré par une société parmi toutes les codifications possibles du discours détermine . . . son *système de genres*"¹⁸. Discourse is therefore not the random product of a free subject operating 'outside' or 'above' the language system, and it is not "an aggregate of conventional forms of expression superposed on some underlying content by 'social factors' of one kind or another"¹⁹. It is the production of a unified cluster of semantic, structural and contextual meanings in accordance with generic norms. Discourse is not *parole*, and a theory of the *systematic* structure of discourse renders invalid the Saussurean dualism on which modern linguistics is founded. Pêcheux has proposed that the opposition of *langue/parole* be replaced by the couple *langue/processus discursifs*, intending by this an opposition not of the abstract to the concrete, the necessary to the contingent, the objective to the subjective, but of two types of system²⁰.

The codification of meanings *appropriate* to a situation is ultimately a function of the ideological formation, and different social classes will encode the genres of discourse with different semantic potentials. Pêcheux has tried to schematise this process by arguing that meaning is produced within the various *discursive formations* (roughly equivalent to what I have called the 'universes of discourse') which are intricated in the ideological system. The discursive formation is a semantic matrix — a structure of relations of synonymy, paraphrase and substitution — which determines what can and should be said in and through a particular register²¹. Halliday and Gregory and Carroll use Bernstein's concept of *code* to formulate this inscription of the production of meaning within social contradictions. Discursive competence is a symbolic capital acquired in the process of socialisation, and the class structure determines relations of possession or dispossession of this capital; "the distribution of speech forms is equally a realisation of the distribution of power"²². Thus the codes governing discursive competence "can be seen to embody a range of meanings access to which is determined by the place the individual occupies in the social structure"²³, and they therefore govern the probable positions and moves of the speaker in a given context. "The codes act as determinants of register, operating on the selection of meanings within situation types: when the systemics of language . . . are activated by the situational determinants of text (the field, tenor and mode . . .), this process is regulated by the codes"²⁴. Like Pêcheux, Halliday envisages a hierarchy of semiotic levels; he suggests that the semantic

system is itself “the projection (encoding, realisation) of some higher level of extra-linguistic meaning”²⁵ which he calls a ‘social semiotic’ and which should doubtless be identified with the ideological system. The information exchanged in any social communication is therefore always in the first place “information from the social system”²⁶, that is, messages “about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries”²⁷.

If meaning is produced in accordance with generic discursive norms, it follows that it is not an *abstract* potential but is closely tied to the structure of the context of production²⁸. Foucault argues that relations of signification can only be assigned within “une relation énonciative déterminée et bien stabilisée”²⁹, and Pêcheux similarly claims that words receive their meaning from the discursive formation in which they are produced: “le sens d’un mot, d’une expression, d’une proposition, etc., n’existe pas ‘en soi-même’ (c’est-à-dire dans son rapport transparent à la littéralité du signifiant), mais est déterminé par les positions idéologiques mises en jeu dans le processus social-historique où mots, expressions et propositions sont produits”³⁰. Polyvalence and connotation are functions of the semantic shift that occurs in the passage from one discursive formation to another. To put this slightly differently: linguistic *value* is produced within particular generic constellations of field, tenor and mode, and the lexical ‘core’ of a word is no more than an aggregate or average produced by the interlocking and overlapping of genres of discourse at any point in time.

However the structure of genre is not simply a positive structure of potentially realisable meanings; it also governs the fields of meaning which will be significant by their absence, i. e., the relevant forms of presupposition. Vološinov’s conception of the *enthymematic* structure of discourse defines the logic of self-evidence which is an important consequence of generic norms³¹. Field and tenor of discourse determine the level of discursive explicitness, i. e., the appropriate kind and degree of presupposition, and this in turn establishes the quality of textual cohesion, especially anaphora, which is governed by the modal distinction between elaborated and restricted code. The ‘free’ (‘pre-constructed’, implicit) information in a sentence is frequently more important than the ‘tied’ information insofar as it anchors the discourse to a context of meaning other than the immediate context³². In an analysis of scientific discourse Greimas indicates that its truth-statements are always linked referentially to *another* discourse or *another* system of knowledge: its authority is established by intertextual (interdiscursive) reference to an endlessly deferred Authority³³. By establishing the limits of the sayable, genre allows the unsaid to be said without being said, i. e., without the speaker taking responsibility for the enunciation of the message³⁴. And by defining that which can be taken for granted it establishes the stable field of meanings, the ideological second nature, which constitutes the real.

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NOTES

- ¹ E. g., T. van Dijk, *Text and Context: Explorations in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse* (London: Longman, 1977), p. 191.
- ² H. Parret, *Language and Discourse*, Janua Linguarum, Series Minor 119 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 275–6.
- ³ V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. L. Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), p. 20.
- ⁴ *ibid*
- ⁵ *ibid* p. 21.
- ⁶ M. Gregory and S. Carroll, *Language and Situation: Language Varieties and their Social Context* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 4.
- ⁷ M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), p. 111.
- ⁸ *ibid* p. 34.
- ⁹ *ibid* p. 109.
- ¹⁰ *ibid* p. 122
- ¹¹ *ibid* p. 110.
- ¹² *ibid* p. 62
- ¹³ *ibid* p. 64
- ¹⁴ E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 44.
- ¹⁵ Gregory and Carroll, pp. 38–47.
- ¹⁶ É. Benveniste, *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale I* (Paris: Éd. Gallimard, 1966), pp. 252–4.
- ¹⁷ J. Spencer and M. Gregory, "An Approach to the Study of Style", in J. Spencer (ed.), *Linguistics and Style* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 101.
- ¹⁸ T. Todorov, *Les Genres du Discours*, Coll. Poétique (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1978), p. 23.
- ¹⁹ Halliday, p. 111.
- ²⁰ M. Pêcheux, *Les Vérités de la Palice*, Coll. Théorie (Paris: Maspéro, 1975), p. 81.
- ²¹ *ibid* p. 144.
- ²² M. Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 177.
- ²³ Gregory and Carroll, p. 80.
- ²⁴ Halliday, p. 67.
- ²⁵ *ibid*, p. 79.
- ²⁶ Douglas, p. 87; quoted in Halliday, p. 79.
- ²⁷ Douglas, p. 249.
- ²⁸ C. f. Vološinov, p. 79: "The meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context. In fact there are as many meanings of a word as there are contexts of its usage."
- ²⁹ M. Foucault, *L'Archéologie du Savoir*, p. 119; quoted in P. Henry, *Le Mauvais Outil: Langue, Sujet et Discours* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977), p. 84.
- ³⁰ Pêcheux, p. 144.
- ³¹ V. N. Vološinov, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I. R. Titunik (New York: Academic Press, 1976), p. 101.
- ³² P. Henry, "On the Processing of Message Referents in Contexts", in E. Carswell and R. Rommetveit (ed.), *Social Contexts of Messages* (London: Academic Press, 1971), p. 88.
- ³³ A. J. Greimas, *Sémiotique et Sciences Sociales* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1976), p. 21.
- ³⁴ Henry, *Le Mauvais Outil*, pp. 58–9.

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