Genre defined

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience. If all high probability expectations are realized, the exemplar will be viewed as prototypical by the parent discourse community. The genre names inherited and produced by discourse communities and imported by others constitute valuable ethnographic communication, but typically need further validation.

3.6 Pre-genres

One of the basic assumptions underlying much of the preceding discussion is that human beings organize their communicative behavior *partly* through repertoires of genres. Thus, it is not the case that all communicative events are considered instances of genres. In fact, there are at least two areas of verbal activity that I believe are best considered to lie outside genres: casual conversation or 'chat' and 'ordinary' narrative.

The nature and role of conversation will be considered first, and Levinson's opening position will serve perfectly well:

> Definition will emerge below, but for the present *conversation* may be taken to be that predominant kind of talk in which two or more participants freely alternate in speaking, which generally occurs *outside specific institutional settings like religious services, law courses, classroom and the like.*
>
> (Levinson, 1983:284, my emphases)

This kind of talk has, of course, been massively studied and discussed, particularly since the advent of the tape recorder (e.g. Grice, 1975; Goffman, 1981; Levinson, 1983; Richards and Schmidt, 1983; Gardner, 1984); and Atkinson (1982) gives the ethnomethodological arguments for the centrality and significance of conversation. As he and many people have observed, 'ordinary' conversation is a fundamental kind of language use: for example Preston (1989:225–6) comments: 'Since conversation in some sense is basic to all face-to-face interaction, it may seem to refer to such a ubiquitous level of speech performance that one would sense a difference between it and anything else one might wish to call a genre'.

Casual conversation presumably occurred early in the evolution of the human race, as it does in a child's acquisition of first language. It takes up, for most of us, a fair part of our days; indeed involvement in conversation can be quite hard to avoid. Further, our sense of the enveloping nature of conversation is brought home when we consider its absence. Therein, after all, lay many of the trials and tribulations of Robinson Crusoe. It is often said that the severity of placing a prisoner in 'solitary confinement' resides as much as anything in the denial of verbal interaction, and a 'vow of silence' is no light undertaking.

Additionally, there would appear to be attestable individual discrepancies between conversational and non-conversational skills. Probably all of us have known people who may be highly effective communicators in certain roles (as teachers, salespeople, joke-tellers, armchair critics and so on) yet who are adjudged to be lacking in the skills of ordinary conversation and thus are thought of as individuals who are 'difficult or uncomfortable to talk with'. Conversely, we probably know people who seem to have a remarkable facility to sustain casual conversation, but who are the first to announce, for instance, that they couldn't stand up and give a vote of thanks to save their lives. These observations all seem to point to the fact that general conversational ability and genre-specific verbal skills may be phenomena of a somewhat different kind.

If these observations have substance, it would seem that ordinary conversation is too persuasive and too fundamental to be usefully considered as a genre. Rather, it is a pre-generic 'form of life', a basis from which more specific types of interaction have presumably either evolved or broken away. The interesting question for the genre analyst is not so much whether conversation is a genre; instead, the interest lies in exploring the kind of relationship that might exist between general conversational patterns, procedures and 'rules' and those that can be discovered in (to give three examples) legal cross-examinations, medical consultations and classroom discourse. In those three cases, are the unfolding interactions best seen as mere extensions and modifications of common conversational practice and thus ultimately parasitic on such practice? Or, alternatively, would we gain a greater understanding of what is happening by considering them as existing independently in separate universes of discourse? Are *Unequal Encounters* (Candlin, 1981) such as normally occur between doctor and patient, lawyer and witness, and teacher and pupil, of a different *kind* to the more equal and less goal-directed encounters that take place in casual conversation?

Another interesting aspect of the putative relationships between the pre-genre and genres occurs in situations where 'ordinary' face-to-face

conversation is replaced by telecommunication. Schegloff (1979) has shown that telephone conversations actually open with the ringing of the telephone and that the person lifting the receiver and speaking is *responding* to a summons. He has also analyzed and described the limited range of procedures that Americans use to identify and recognize each other on the telephone (much less of a problem, of course, if you can see to whom you are about to talk). Owen (1981) has written interestingly on the use of 'well' and 'anyway' as signals given by British telephone speakers to indicate a wish to close a topic or a call. However, to establish that a particular kind of communicative event has specific, situation-bound opening and closing procedures is not, in fact, to establish very much, because specificity may well be concentrated at initiation and termination (Richards and Schmidt, 1983:132–3). For example, open-ings like 'Merry Christmas', 'Good morning, Sir', 'Oh, we are smart today', 'Come here often, do you?' reflect particular circumstances that are likely to be of rapidly diminishing importance as the conversation proceeds. Therefore, on present evidence, it would seem sensible to exclude personal telephone conversations from genre status and to consider them, despite their relatively short history, as part of the pre-genre.

In contrast, we can immediately recognize the unusual nature of radio-telephony. Robertson (1985; 1988), for example, outlines the purposes of plane–ground radio-telephony as to:

i) prevent collisions in the air;
ii) prevent collisions between aircraft and between aircraft and obstructions on the manoeuvering area;
iii) expedite and maintain orderly flow of air-traffic;
iv) provide advice and information useful for the safe and efficient conduct of flights.

(Robertson, 1985:295)

Given these aims it is not surprising that there have evolved especially rigid rules for *turn-taking* (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974) and special conventions for clarifying both rhetorical function and identity. These conventions have to be learnt by native speakers as well as non-native speakers, as the following fragment illustrates:

Control: Sierra Fox 132, correction, Sierra Fox 123, what is your flight level?
Pilot: Flight level 150, Sierra Fox 123.
Control: Say again flight level, Sierra Fox.
Pilot: Flight level 150, Sierra Fox 123.

(Robertson, 1985:303)

Radio-telephonic Air Traffic Control meets the criteria for genre status.

If casual conversation is a pre-generic dialogic activity, is there a comparable pre-genre for monologue? The obvious candidate is *narration* (if viewed as a process) or *narrative* (if viewed as product). Narrative, like conversation, is a fast expanding research field (Van Dijk, 1972; Grimes, 1975; Longacre, 1983) and has developed its own disciplinary name, *Narratology* (Prince, 1982). For present purposes I will simply follow Longacre and suggest that narration (spoken or written) operates through a framework of temporal succession in which at least some of the events are reactions to the previous events. Further characteristics of narrative are that such discourses tend to be strongly oriented towards the agents of the events being described, rather than to the events themselves, and that the structure is typically that of 'a plot'. These pre-generic long turns commonly occur in letters and also arise as responses to such prompts as 'How was the vacation?' or 'How did the meeting go?' and so on.

In a way analogous to that described for conversation, specific types of narrative diverge from the pre-generic norm and thus begin to acquire genre status. Thus in news stories the temporal succession is disturbed by putting 'the freshest on the top'. In reports of various kinds, such as those describing scientific work, events rather than agents predominate. Jokes have temporal sequences, agent orientation and plot, but the resolution of the plot is specific: the moment of resolution needs to be overtly signaled (the onset of the punch line) whilst the manner of resolution needs to be unpredictable.

A final point perhaps worth making at this juncture is that the English-speaking world (as one of many) uses *names* to describe classes of communications that quite appropriately operate as higher-order categories than genres. One very common example is the *letter*. This useful term, of course, makes reference to the *means* of communication, but lacks as a class sufficient indication of purpose for genre status. The same observation holds for subsets of the class that refer to fields of activity such as business letters or official letters. It is only when purpose becomes ascribable that the issue of genre arises, as in begging letters or letters of condolence. Category labels like *letters* do not therefore refer to pre-genres in the sense used here, but operate as convenient multigeneric generalizations.

3.7 Differences among genres

If there were only minor differences among genres there would be little need for genre analysis as a theoretical activity separable from discourse analysis, and probably no need at all for an analysis driven by applied concerns. But, of course, it turns out that genres vary significantly along

quite a number of different parameters. We have already seen that they vary according to complexity of rhetorical purpose – from the ostensibly simple *recipe* to the ostensibly complex *political speech*. They also vary greatly in the degree to which exemplars of the genre are prepared or constructed in advance of their communicative instantiation (Nystrand, 1986). Typical prepared genres might include research papers, letters of personal reference, poems, recipes, news broadcasts and so on, while at the other extreme arguments and rows typically flare up without malice aforethought. Genres also vary in terms of the mode or medium through which they are expressed; indeed the configurations of speech versus writing can become quite complex (Gregory, 1967). For instance, of the previous examples of prepared genres, most are predominantly written. However, research papers can be presented at conferences in 'manuscript delivery' (Dubois, 1985) or as 'aloud reading' (Goffman, 1981), while references and recipes can in an emergency be communicated by the telephone. Poems in western cultures have in modern times been a predominantly written form, although 'aloud reading' of them is an ongoing tradition and one thought of as requiring uncommon skill in modulated performance (in the case of actors) or in interpretation (in the case of poets reading their own work). In other cultures the converse may apply with poetry as an essentially oral medium, written forms operating as archival repositories. News broadcasts are scripted and then read aloud.

Prepared-text genres like those we have been considering vary also in the extent to which their producers are conventionally expected to consider their anticipated audiences and readerships. However, this variability is somewhat at odds with much current thinking on and research into writing processes. An influential and representative advocate of the interactional orientation to reading and writing processes is Widdowson (Widdowson, 1979; 1983; 1984). He expresses his 1979 position, which has little changed (cf. 1984:220) in this way:

> As I write, I make judgements about the reader's possible reactions, anticipate any difficulties that I think he might have in understanding and following my directions, conduct, in short, covert dialogue with my supposed interlocutor.
>
> (Widdowson, 1979:176)

According to this view, writers, at least competent ones, are trying to second-guess both their readers' general state of background knowledge and their potential immediate processing problems. At the same time (competent) readers are interrogating authors on their present positions as well as trying to predict where the authors' lines of thought or description will lead. There is, as it were, a reciprocity of semantic effort

to be engaged in by both sides; a contract binding writer and reader together in reaction and counter-reaction.

Investigations into various genres would, however, suggest that this supposed sociocognitive activity is over-generalized, since a producer's contract with a receiver is not general, but subject to quite sharp genre fluctuations. Of course, the interactional view is obviously both appropriate and useful in certain contexts such as the processing of recipes and news broadcasts. Indeed, Hugh L'Estrange (personal communication) has pointed to the fact that recipe-mongers who fail to be considerate of the reader can contribute to gastronomical shipwreck, as in 'Transfer immediately to a *pre-greased* tin'. And news broadcasts go to quite considerable lengths to ensure that they are comprehensible both by repetition ('Here are the main points again') and by providing background information ('President Kyprianou of Cyprus', 'Faya-Largau, a strategic town in Northern Chad . . .') (Al-Shabbab, 1986). While recipes and news broadcasts may be marginal to the purposes of this book, we can also affirm that a unifying characteristic of instructional-process genres will be consideration for the reader or listener.

However, it remains the case that in certain genres, usually written ones, the writer has the right to withdraw from the contract to consider the reader because of an overriding imperative to be 'true' to the complexity of subject matter or to the subtlety of thought and imagination (Elbow, 1988). Thus we find that in a significant number of genre texts, in laws and other regulatory writings, in original works in philosophy, theology and mathematics (and arguably theoretical linguistics), in many poems, and in certain novels of which Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* would be an extreme example, there is a diminished consideration for the reader. Joyce, after all, is reported to have commented on *Finnegan's Wake* to the effect that as the book took him 18 years to write he didn't see why the reader shouldn't take as long to read it.

There is in fact a standard defense of the legal draughtsman's practice of using very long sentences containing numerous and elaborate qualifications (all those elements beginning *notwithstanding, in accordance with, without prejudice to* etc.). This defense would claim that it is ultimately more satisfactory for a legal text to reveal clarity after detailed and expert study than to be a text that, however immediately accessible to an educated lay audience, falls into ambiguity upon multiple reading (Bhatia, 1983).

Thus it turns out that certain legal, academic and literary texts all point to another kind of contract that can exist between writer and reader. This is one not based on 'consideration' but on *respect*. If we use Widdowson's device of imagining the thoughts of the writer, it might come out something like this:

> As I write, I am aware that, whatever I do, what I write will be difficult for most readers. Because of what I am trying to achieve, this is unavoidable. This is why I must convince the readers that their efforts will be rewarded; I need to keep their faith that I am not making my text unnecessarily difficult.

While Flower (1979) and her co-workers may be generally right in their theory that the immature writer produces 'writer-based prose' and the mature writer 'reader-based prose', it would seem equally clear that in certain genres mature writers also produce 'writer-based prose'.

Genres also vary in the extent to which they are likely to exhibit universal or language-specific tendencies. On the one hand, it would appear that the diplomatic press communiqué has developed a global if devious set of conventions whereby, for instance, 'a full and frank exchange of views' is interpreted by discourse community members throughout the capitals of the world as signifying that the parties failed to agree. On the other hand, one might reasonably assume that marriage proposals will differ widely from one language community to another because they are deeply embedded in particular socioeconomic cultural matrices.

The sociolinguistic literature on the form, structure and rationale of specific communicative events is vast and falls largely outside the scope of this book (see Saville-Troike, 1982; Downes, 1984; and Preston, 1989 for overviews). However, there is one investigative area that is directly relevant to a pedagogically-oriented study of academic English, one known as *Contrastive Rhetoric*.

The concept of Contrastive Rhetoric was originally elaborated by Robert Kaplan in a 1966 article entitled 'Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education' (Kaplan, 1966). Kaplan, who has remained active in this area, more recently summarized the concept as follows:

> There are, it seems to me, important differences between languages in the way in which discourse topic is identified in a text and in the way in which discourse topic is developed in terms of exemplification, definition, and so on.
>
> (Kaplan, 1987:10)

The notion that the rhetorical structure of languages differs is not only relevant in itself, but more particularly because much of the work to date has been based on the study of expository prose (Connor and Kaplan, 1987). Kaplan and Ostler (1982), in a review of the literature, conclude, despite a minority of studies to the contrary, that different languages have different preferences for certain kinds of discourse patterns. For instance, they argue that English expository prose has an essentially linear rhetorical pattern which consists of:

> . . . a clearly defined topic, introduction, body which explicates all but nothing more than the stated topic, paragraphs which chain from one to the next, and a conclusion which tells the reader what has been discussed . . . no digression, no matter how interesting, is permitted on the grounds that it would violate unity.
>
> (Kaplan and Ostler, 1982:14)

They then contrast this pattern with the elaborate parallel structures found in Arabic prose, with the more digressive patterns of writing in Romance languages which permit 'tangential' material to be introduced in the discourse, and so on. Clyne (1987), in a particularly careful study, has examined the *Exkurs* or 'digression' in contemporary academic German and is able to show, among other things, that the *Exkurs* is not only institutionalized in certain German genres but has no easy translation equivalent in English.

Comparison of languages is notoriously difficult, especially at the discoursal level (see Houghton and Hoey, 1983, for a specification of *caveats*). Among such caveats it is important to compare texts of the same *genre* in two languages. Ostler (1987), for example, can be criticized for comparing student placement essays with extracts from published texts.

In general terms the existence today of 'invisible colleges' and of transnational discourse communities is likely to lead to universalist tendencies in research genres. A strong form of the universalist hypothesis is offered by Widdowson:

> Scientific exposition is structured according to certain patterns of rhetorical organization which, with some tolerance for individual stylistic variation, imposes a conformity on members of the scientific community no matter what language they happen to use.
>
> (Widdowson, 1979:61)

Najjar's 1988 study of research articles in English and Arabic dealing with agricultural science shows sufficiently few and sufficiently unimportant differences to provide some support for the universalist argument. However, as we have seen, Clyne (1987) provides some counter-evidence from German as does Peng (personal communication) from Mandarin. The jury is still out.

Although universalist tendencies may be apparent in research activities, those who have taught in different higher education institutions around the world have typically been struck by the peculiarities of study modes, teaching styles and of general educational expectations within particular institutions (James, 1980). If we examine, say, the first years of undergraduate study in Faculties of Science, I believe it would be difficult to argue that what goes on in those faculties is part of a universal scientific culture. Rather, we tend to find in this area of scientific activity

powerful local influences of many kinds: national, social, cultural, technical and religious. The ways in which such influences form particular 'educational cultures' have been described for various parts of the world: Thailand (Hawkey and Nakornchai, 1980); Iran (Houghton, 1980); the Arab World (Dudley-Evans and Swales, 1980; Holliday, 1984); Asia (Ballard and Clanchy, 1984). There have also been some interesting studies of the 'rhetorical gaps' that apprentice researchers from overseas have to cross when learning English academic style: a Yemeni Arab student (Holes, 1984); a Brazilian (James, 1984a); a Thai and a Japanese (Ballard, 1984). All in all, it looks as though the relativist hypothesis has some substance in teacher–student genres such as textbooks, lectures and tutorials. Nevertheless, we face a difficulty in interpretation. We can either lean towards intrinsic cultural differences, or we can prefer an explanation that would go no further than stress the relevance of recent history. For instance, are the differences between western and Arab educational genres a reflection of differences in rhetorical and ideological codes, or do they signify little more than different stages in an educational cycle? More precisely, would we do better to interpret such differences as deriving principally from, on the one hand, an Islamicized verbalistic tradition and, on the other, a secularized pragmatic European or North American tradition? Or should we conclude that modes of study and modes of expression commonly accepted and practiced in the Arab World today are in surprising numbers of ways similar to those existing in the West 50 years ago (the teacher *qua* teacher as respected authority, a stress on rote-learning, a style of writing in the tradition of *belles-lettres* etc.)? An educational ethos which may, of course, yet revive in the West.

At present, our perspectives on the formative influence of the educational environment rest largely on anecdote, incidental observation and the single-subject case study. Mohan and Lo (1985:515) are certainly correct in their critique of Contrastive Rhetoric when they point to 'a need for greater awareness of students' native literacy and educational experience as factors influencing the development of academic writing in a second language'. It is hoped that the concept of genre developed in this book, especially with regard to features of text-role and text-environment, will contribute to a less narrowly linguistic orientation in Contrastive Rhetoric studies. And indeed, independently, there are signs that this is already happening. Hinds (1987:143–4) has suggested that English-language cultures tend to charge the writer 'with the responsibility to make clear and well-organized statements', whereas in Japanese culture 'it is the responsibility of the listener (or reader) to understand what it is that the speaker or author had intended to say'. Hinds' typology can thus be related, in a cross-cutting way, to the previous discussion on genre-specific differences in the writer's responsibility. Finally, Eggington

(1987) has shown the existence of two rhetorical styles in contemporary academic Korean, one deriving from traditional rhetoric and the other much influenced by English. Although Eggington does not put it in these terms, we can see here the existence of two discourse communities: an elite group of US-educated scholars who are members of the international community of researchers in their specialization, and a larger national community using traditional Korean rhetoric. Indeed, the discourse community concept, as a sociorhetorical construct, offers some general illumination on the difficult and important question of academic language variation across cultures and generations.