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A Synthesis of Research on Genre in Educational Context: Systemic Functional Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes the literature in genre studies in educational context, specifically focussing on genre in systemic functional linguistics tradition. I retrieved the literature mainly from journal articles, book chapters, and research reports. I compared the three traditions of genre at the beginning, explicating the commonalities and differences among the three schools of genre in terms of definition, theoretical framework, and goal. I then focused on research in genre in educational context from systemic functional linguistics. I answered four major research questions by synthesizing the results with the retrieved literature: (1) delineating the historical development of genre studies in educational context; (2) mapping out types of genres that have been studied; (3) exploring the focused areas of studies of these genres; and (4) finally, finding out the research gaps in the field. The synthesis revealed that SFL genre could be applied in a wider context, such as ESL. In addition, more studies in academic writing is highly recommended.

KEY WORDS: Genre, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Genre-based Pedagogy, Educational Linguistics

1   INTRODUCTION

In the study of genre, register and text typology, different schools of scholars perceive text in epistemologically different terms. Even within the school of functional linguistics, the perception of text is varied. Among these, two major views of text are the genre model developed within the "Sydney School" of Systemic Functional Linguistics based on the work by J.R. Martin and his collaborators (Martin & Rose, 2008; Martin, 1992) and the context-based text typology developed by C.M.I.M. Matthiessen and his collaborators (Matthiessen 2006, Matthiessen 2013a, 2013b, Matthiessen & Teruya 2014, Matthiessen, Teruya & Lam, 2010; Teruya 2007). In this paper, I will review the studies of genre, especially focusing on the Sydney School of genre and its relations to the other schools of genre. Then, I will focus on studies of genre in educational contexts, especially in L2 learning contexts.

In the educational literature on genre, there are three schools of genre that have been identified in relation to the educational context (Hyon, 1996). They are (1) the variety of the SFL tradition which has come to be called "the Sydney School", associated with the work by J.R. Martin and his team within SFL, which originated in the 1980s and was comprehensively documented by Martin (1992), (2) the approach to genre developed in the academic context of ESP (English for specific purpose), Swales (1990a) and (3) the North American School of genre, the New Rhetoric studies, first articulated by Miller (1984). For a general account, we can refer to the table in Figure 1 to see the major contributions in these three schools of genres in the past decades.

As Figure 1 indicates, we can see the development of the three schools of genre in the past decades chronologically. The Sydney School evolved into two main branches, one concerned with multi literacy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Kress, 2003; Lemke, 2002; Unsworth, Thomas, Simpson, & Asha, 2005) and the other with subject specific genres, mainly based secondary school subjects research (Christie, 2002b; Coffin, 1996; Coffin, 2006; Macken-Horarik, 2002; Rothery, 1994; Rothery & Stenglin, 1994a; Rothery & Stenglin, 1994b; Schleppegrell, 2004; Unsworth et al., 2005). Both of the branches are about educational linguistics and they have made great contributions to literacy and education related study.

Figure 1: The development of the three schools of genre by time.

If we refer to Figure 1, we can see very clear steps of the evolution of the Swalesian School. From the very beginning, Swales (1981) proposed the definition of the genre used in ESP, and gradually the system developed into a more matured one. We can see the academic course for NNS (Non-Native Speaker) (Swales, 1990), then comes his highly influential book *Genre Analysis* (Swales, 1990), continuing his contribution to the study of academic discourse. And later, his student V.K. Bhatia applied this theory in a broader way: professional genre: legal writing genre (Bhatia, 1993), which made this school of genre more

comprehensive: the coverage of genres was extended from those of spoken and written academic discourse to include genres in other kinds of institution. Johns (1997) proposed socio-literate activity in genre study and then, Hyland (2004) brought corpus linguistics and social constructionist theory into the study of ESP genre.

Looking at the genre studies dealing with mother language education, we should refer to another school of genre study called the North American School, which is well-known for researching first language composition at university level, lots of studies push this field forward and extended the study scope of genre over the past several decades. We can see from Figure 2.1 that this school was not just restricted to the study on school-based genre; this school has the following extended areas. Yates (1989) studied the genre of memos in companies. Then, subsequent studies related to the work place genres were researched in this school: texts from accounting (Devitt, 1991), texts from bank (Coe, 1994), and also genre of biology textbooks (Myers, 1997).

2   COMPARISON OF THE THREE SCHOOLS

Based on Hyon's (1996) comparison of the differences of the three schools of genres in educational settings, in order to have a more thorough understanding of the three different schools of genres, I have constructed Table 1 to compare them in terms of ten areas.

Within the genre model of SFL, genre is a staged, goal oriented, social process (see e.g. Martin, 1992: 546), and the ESP school views genre as a shared communicative event with a purpose (Johns 1981; 1990; 1993), while the North American School (Miller, 1984) takes genre as a recurrent social rhetorical action. The origins of the different schools embody different research perspectives: Martin led projects studying primary and secondary writing in Sydney in the 1980s and proposed that genre could be theorized as a stratum within the plane of context.

Mostly influenced by discourse analysis and applied linguistics, Swales (1981) studied a very large sample of academic articles written by ESL learners in Aston University and found recurring patterns in these articles. The writers whose works he studied were mainly from English as a second language international students.

For the North American School, the pioneer Miller (1984) claimed that her school of genre is eclectic. She studied freshmen's compositions at U.S. universities and formed her school of genre studies in North American. These studies focus mainly on the text structure and the rhetorical features of the text in first language.

Table 1: Comparison of the three schools of genre

Schools / Different areas compared	Sydney School	ESP School	North American School
Definition	Staged, goal oriented social process	Communicative events with shared communicative purpose	Rhetorical social recurrent action
Object of study	Mostly L1 Writing from primary and secondary school but also adult migrant L2	L2 academic writing: tertiary level	L1 college composition study: tertiary level
Goal	Helping students succeed in school based learning	Helping L2 learners to recognize the patterns and linguistic features in texts and use them when they write	Helping L1 students to recognize the patterns and rhetoric structure of their academic writing
Context	Child and adolescent context, and adult migrant English	English for academic purposes and English for professional communication	University students and novice professionals at work
Instructional framework	Genre-based pedagogy	No detailed methodology	Lack of explicit instruction
Theoretical foundation	Systemic functional linguistics	Discourse analysis, applied linguistics	Philosophy, anthropology and speech act theory
Research methods	Linguistic features analysis	Linguistic analysis focus on global structure	Ethnographic methods
Scope of implementation	Far reaching impact in Australia education	Some influence	Small scale influence
Linguistic context of research	English medium instruction schooling	English as a second language	mother tongue

They are also different in the following areas, as shown by Table 1. First, let's look at the instructional framework of the genre in the three schools. In the Sydney School, they have developed genre-based pedagogy, which has had profound influence in Australia and now also in other parts of the world, while the other two schools have no such explicit framework in applying their accounts of genre in educational contexts.

The theoretical foundations are different too. The Sydney School is based mainly on SFL. The ESP School draws its theoretical foundation from applied linguistics and discourse analysis, while the North American School employs theories from a range of other disciplines, for example, philosophy, anthropology and speech act theory. The Sydney School and the ESP School adopt linguistics analysis in analyzing texts, while the North American School uses ethnographic methods in looking at texts.

Looking back to the literature, we will also find the different impact of the three schools of genre in their "birth places". Among these, the Sydney School has the most far-reaching impact in Australia. It has helped the Australia government innovate the educational system in language learning and literacy development; and the work has now been picked up and developed in various parts of the world. The ESP School has smaller scale of influence in academic writing while the North American School has the least influence in its context. The languages they study are also different. The Sydney School carries out their studies under the context of English medium instruction educational context, the ESP School focuses on second language academic writing, while the North American School focuses on mother tongue English writing.

These are the differences we can see in terms of the ten areas. Since the scope of this study, I have adopted here is SFL, I focus mainly on reviewing the Sydney School of genre here in the following sections.

3   SFL GENRE

The SFL tradition of genre originated at the beginning of 1980s. Prior to this, we can see some earlier studies that were related to genre, for examples, Mitchell's (1957) study on language of buying and selling and Hasan (1978)'s study on text. Ever since 1980s, we can see a great deal of works have been done with this model of genre. Among these, the pioneer should be Halliday and Martin. Halliday created educational linguistics within SFL. Martin led the team in applying and researching the genre model. In reviewing this school, we refer to the 2008 version of the book: *Genre Relations: Mapping Culture* which written by Martin and Rose and their 2012 book: *Learning to Write, Reading to Learn Genre, knowledge and pedagogy in the Sydney School* (Rose & Martin, 2012). These books can be the textbook of the Sydney School of genre and also can be considered to be the summative works of Martin's genre studies in the past decades. As we can see this in the preface of these books, they summarized studies of genres in many different institutions. We also have more recent literature on genre published in different venues by different scholars (Hasan, Matthiessen & Webster, 2008), which we refer to here as well. Here, we can review the background for the purpose of understanding more about this book and this school of genre.

3.1   *The beginning*

In the late 70s, Frances Christie proposed to her colleagues Joan Rothery and J.R. Martin to improve school literacy education in Australia. Joan Rothery and Martin worked

with her at that time. They analyzed primary school student writing to identify the text types and linguistic patterns in their output. This is the beginning of the approach to genre study that came to be known as the Sydney School.

3.2 The flourishing period

A great many projects related to genre were undertaken during this period: the 1980s. Martin's 7-year project led the fashion of study of genre in different institutions in this period. The "writing project", actually inspired by Martin's students' studies of genre in different institutions, for example, service encounters (Ventola, 1987), spoken narratives (Nesbitt & Plum, 1988; Plum, 1988), and casual conversation (Slade & Eggins, 1997). Getting inspiration from these studies, Martin and his team proposed to study school genres to help primary school education. The team, which included Joan Rothery, Suzanne Eggins, Radan Martinec and Peter Wignell, started to analyze the genres they collected in primary schools in Sydney. They found that the school text types were distributed unevenly in student writing; in primary school, students wrote mostly in story genres. In addition, France Christie became interested in applying genre to classroom discourse, leading to significant research into this type of discourse (Christie & Dreyfus, 2007; Christie, 2002a; Christie, 2002b; Christie, 2005; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Christie, 2010; Christie, 1989; Christie & Martin, 1997).

The second well-known project during this period, also conducted in Sydney, was called Disadvantaged Schools Program. This project began as a project called "Language and Social Power Project" and later evolved into the "Write it Right Project" (1990-1996). All the works related to school subjects are summed up as in Table 2.

Table 2: Genres investigated in the Write It Right Project

Subjects	Areas in focus	
History	Coffin (1996); Eggins, Wignell & Martin (1996)	History literacy
	Brook, Coffin & Humphrey (1996)	Australian identity
English	Rothery & Stenglin (1994a)	Literacy in English
	Rothery & Stenglin (1994b)	Spine-chilling story
	Rothery (1994)	Narrative
	Rothery & Stenglin (1994c)	Writing book review
Geography	Humphrey (1996)	Literacy in geography
	Humphrey & Takans (1996)	Explaining the weather
Mathematics	Veel & Christie (1999)	Mathematics in secondary school

As shown in Table 2, Eggins, Wignell & Martin (1993), Coffin (1996) and Brook,

Coffin & Humphrey (1996) studied mainly history textbooks and history genres. Rothery and Stenglin focused mainly on English language literacy (Rothery, 1994; Rothery & Stenglin, 1994a; Rothery & Stenglin, 1994b; Rothery & Stenglin, 1994c). Humphrey & Takans studied geography discourse (Humphrey, 1996; Humphrey & Takans, 1996). For science discourse, Unsworth (1997) and Veel (1995) studied science explanation and discourse respectively.

The studies of work place genres were undertaken by the following scholars. They are Christie & Martin (1997), Martin & Veel (1998), Rose (1997; 1998), White (1997; 1998; 2000), Iedema, Feez & White (1994; 1995).

3.3 The consolidation period: Genre Relation: Mapping Culture

Summarizing the work mentioned in the previous section, Martin & Rose (2008) present an overview in *Genre Relation: Mapping Culture*, including work on two types of institution, schools and work places.

For the school part, there are different genres that Martin & Rose (2008) summarized in their book. They are story genres, history genres and the reports and explanations; see Figures 2, 3, 4.

In addition to Figures 2, 3 and 4, we can see the different genres from work places, especially from factories in Australia. They summarized different moves that occur in the text they collected from workplace, for the purpose of improving the understanding of the texts in the working place. And by doing this, they helped train the workers for their specific posts to enhance their working efficiency.
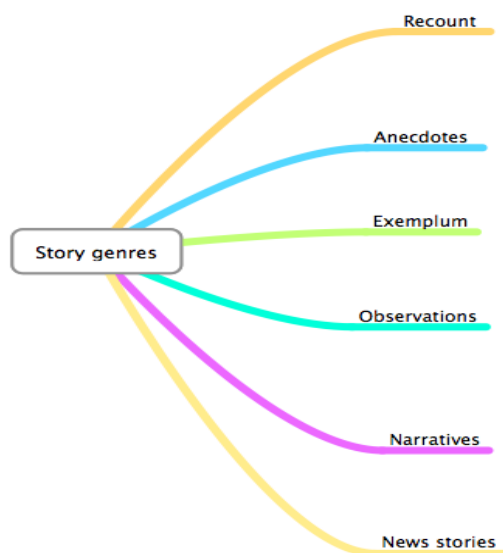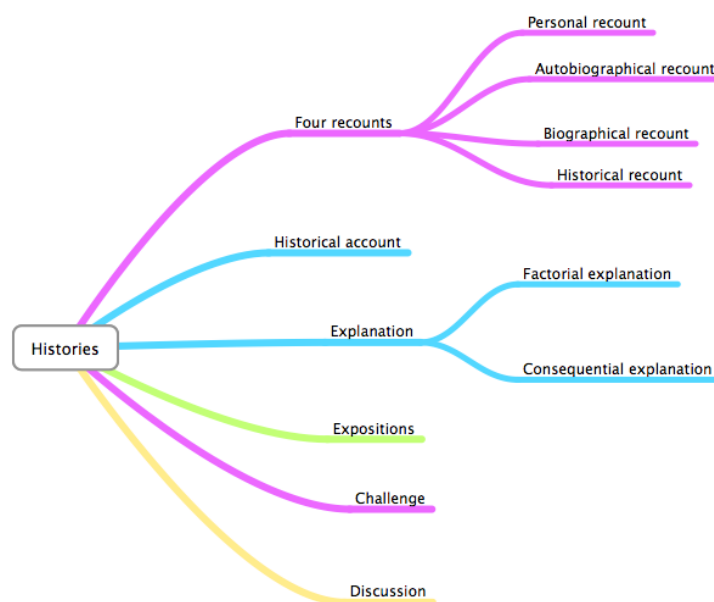

Figure 2: Story genres
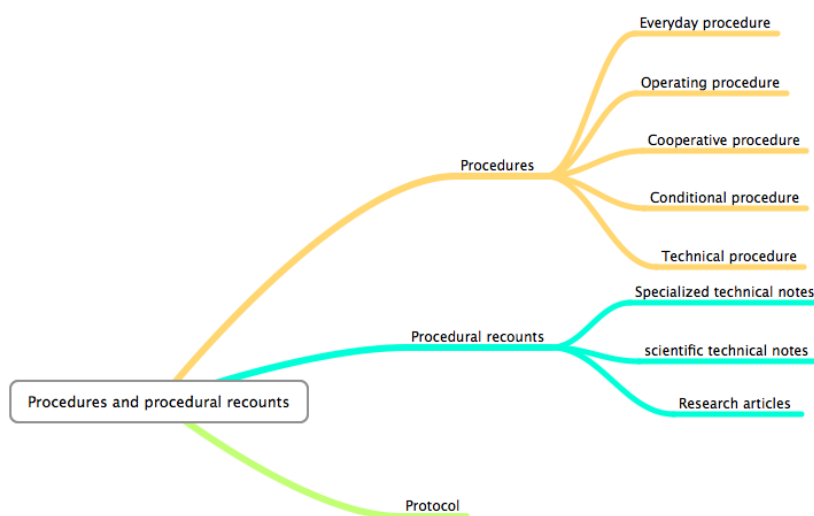
Figure 3: History genres

Figure 4: Procedures and procedural recounts

These are the works Martin & Rose (2008) have presented and summarized in their book, which is one of the key publications in the Sydney School of genre research. All of these research projects and studies took place in a first language environment. All the data came from different institutions in the Australian context. In addition to this first language context research, how about the second language research context? The following section will take a recent project applying the Sydney School genre theory in teaching foreign language German to American university undergraduates in the U.S. as an example, to illustrate how and in what ways this school of genre has been successful in second language teaching and

learning.

4   APPLICATION OF SFL GENRE IN L2 CONTEXT: THE CASE OF GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

4.1   Introduction of the program

The Georgetown University German Department (GUGD) has an undergraduate program in German (Byrnes, Hiram & John, 2010). Heidi and her team took their department as a case study, and the transformation of their curriculum was conducted as early as 1997. Over the past decade, they innovated, updating the existing traditions in foreign language teaching and learning. They adopted SFL as the theoretical tool for this revolution in the U.S. context. From students, instructors, researchers, assistants, to professors and the head of the department, the team had experienced a great deal in applying approach: SFL genre-based approach to revolutionize their foreign language teaching and learning. All these years, they have had more than 324 students getting involved in their long-running project to contribute to their research and teaching.

4.2   The project

The Georgetown project began in 2002, which is a longitudinal study or we can say it is an experiment on curricular innovation. By pointing out the difficulties that the current communicative teaching methods cannot solve in the 21st century under the circumstance of the global context, the team adopted SFL as the theoretical tool to help them to change their teaching and learning framework. They pointed out that for advanced foreign language learners it was indispensable to help them to merge language learning and culture learning. By employing a genre-based approach in their teaching, they can help solve this problem. The authors demonstrate how SFL can be a suitable tool for this revolution and how the genre-based approach can help in innovating foreign language curriculum. The genre-based approach became the main compass in steering the direction of the development in Georgetown University German Department. The results indicate that this application has been timely and fruitful, especially in pushing students onto a higher level of learning.

4.3   The major outcomes

First, the Georgetown project is a combination of SFL and SLA in the U.S. context, which contributes to the enrichment of the genre model of the Sydney School.

Second, the genre-based approach help push the development of writing teaching to an advanced foreign language level. The team helped the department develop the whole 4-year writing curriculum in detail, which is illustrated in the book *Realizing Advanced L2 Writing Development in a Collegiate Curriculum: Curricular Design, Pedagogy, Assessment* (Byrnes, Heidi, Hiram H. Maxim and John M. Norris, 2010) in detail. Furthermore, they also sequenced all the genres into the program, making teaching and learning genres in a more explicit way.

Third, the team adopted genre-based model for the assessment as well. It enriched the assessment system for writing, including the completion of the task in the genre-based assessing criteria for the first time.

5   CONCLUSION

Genre in systemic functional linguistics has been applied in different fields in education context. Based on the present synthesis, I propose the following several future research directions with genre theories. First, given its current gaps left in this model, application of genre in second language learning and teaching is highly recommended. Second, utilizing this model in L2 teacher training is needed. As we can see, genre model has been applied and we have mapped out so many different types of genres in different school subjects. If we have more empirical studies on how to deploy those research findings to facilitate classroom teaching or materials development, that would be practical. Last, wider application of this model in different languages learning research will be a plus. Most of genre studies are conducted in the context of L2 English learning and teaching. If we can apply this model to more L2 contexts, it will absolutely enrich this model and generate more interesting findings.

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