

Genre and Mode in the Academic Discourse Community

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Abstract

In this chapter, we will examine the socially semiotic nature of the academic conference as it is manifested in terms of genre analysis and mode. This will be examined particularly through the binary relationships of spoken vs. written modes, science vs. the humanities, and dialogue vs. monologue.

8.1 A Brief Overview of Genre

Most of the early work on genre analysis was focused upon written academic texts, such as published RPs. Various discourse communities have long-established norms or expectations regarding how written texts should be managed within their particular field.

Most widely known among these is the canonical IMRD (Introduction-Methods/Materials-Results-Discussion/Conclusion) RP structure, well-known to almost every novice involved in publishing academic research, arguably to the extent where it has come to serve as a de facto generic template of research writing. However, until recently, much less scholarship had focused upon spoken research genres, although as of the writing of this book in 2017, older models of academic discourse, which subordinated speech to writing, seem to have largely disappeared.

Research focus upon differences between written and spoken forms of English gained particular credence after the publication of Hymes' (1966) focus upon communicative competence, with the multimodal approach becoming more firmly established in the late 1970s to the early 1990s (particularly with the publication of Halliday's (1985) 'Introduction to Functional Grammar,' and a number of works highlighting the distinctive qualities of the spoken language popularized throughout the 1990s by Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter).

Early research into spoken forms tended to focus heavily on features of register, particularly if and when genre analysis was applied. Until the turn of the millennium though, little was noted regarding how spoken forms were managed in specific genres, such as academic conferences.

This area has become a source of interest for applied linguists because genre and specific speech events tend to coincide (Hymes, 1971), as generic norms depend upon a shared set of speech event communicative purposes. Genre knowledge thus equals a type of communicative competence. Discourse communities that share communicative purposes usually share genres (Hyland, 2001), meaning that the conference attendee should, ideally, understand what genre knowledge entails within their given discourse community. Fairclough (1992) further remarks that genres are not static or fixed and that within a given discourse community, there are any number or recognized genres and that these are mutually influential and make discourse community interactions systematic. This also underscores the need for consciously situating one's CP appropriately because, as we have noted, academic conferences involve semiotic spanning, the multimodal realization of communication among a wide variety of members and participants.

Genre is described as a social construct that regulates communication, interaction, and relations within the discourse community (Bazerman, 1988). However, it is Swales (1990) who is generally credited with establishing the prototype for analyzing the manner in which specific genres of English can or should be marked within particular discourse communities, particularly in terms of analyzing the rhetorical moves within the text. Bhatia (2004) eventually expanded this view of genre analysis to include text-external factors, such as sociopragmatic, sociocognitive, critical, and ethnographic features. Genres have beginnings, middles, endings, and also mark how a culture is realized in language. Genre analysis accounts for the textual features utilized therein, with reference to the purpose that it serves to the discourse community.

Lu and Corbett (2012) argue that novice practitioners need knowledge of content and conventions, as well as an understanding as to how these features can be realized in narrative form, such as in medical case presentations and studies. Lu and Corbett also argue that context-specific registers (such as topic/domain, mode, plus the relationship between producer and processor) need to be established first, only after which genres can be specifically described. In fact, any multidimensional genre analysis must take into account numerous situational factors, including what Biber and Conrad (2001) refer to as the 'degree of involvement' between the producer of the text and the content of the text itself.

Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) list five principles for genre knowledge (see Table 8.1), which they view not so much as a textual product but as a product of unfolding social processes. These are:

Some of the factors that affect or define genre knowledge will be discussed in the next few sections.

Table 8.1 Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995): Five principles for genre knowledge

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| | 1. Dynamism—Genres change with time as users need change. For example, the suitability of deploying the standard IMRD research formula in a CP will depend on the vagaries of the CPs purpose and goals. |
| | 2. Situatedness—Genre knowledge as learned through participation within the routines or conventions of the community. This is particularly marked in understanding the roles of presenter and discussant in Q&A or discussion sessions. |
| | 3. Form and content—Knowledge thereof, as well as knowing when to utilize forms and content that are codified within the genre. |
| | 4. Duality of structure—As users utilize generic structures, they also reconstitute those structures, acting as a scaffold to develop further genre knowledge. |
| | 5. Community Ownership—The epistemology, social oncology, and ideology of a discourse community are realized in its generic conventions. |

Questions and Exercises for Section 8.1

1. Explain how Hymes' notion of communicative competence is integrally connected with genre knowledge.
2. Explain how genre might be best understood through the concept of 'situatedness.' Give an example.
3. What was Swales' primary contribution to the understanding of genre analysis? How did Bhatia expand upon this?
4. Before a given genre can be adequately described or analyzed, which macro-features need to be known?

8.2 Written Versus Spoken Academic English (with Reference to CPs)

Most previous textual analyses of the manner in which 'moves' in academic English discourse are managed have tended to focus upon academic writing in general and academic RPs in particular. In contrast, it appears that relatively little attention has been paid as to how spoken academic texts are managed (Mauranen, 2001; Liu, 2008). Yet, as we have seen, academic CPs in particular are widely considered vital indicators of active participation in a given professional discourse community (Ventola, 2002), and as such, the manner in which such oral texts are arranged and delivered deserves our attention.

Expectations and norms of academic conference discourse will of course vary according to the academic domain, with one primary factor therein being the epistemological continuum of knowledge between the 'hard sciences' and the

Table 8.2 A continuum of academic knowledge (from Hyland, 2009, p. 63)

Sciences	Humanities
Empirical/objective	Explicitly interpretive
Linear growth of knowledge	Dispersed knowledge
Experimental methods	Discursive argument
Quantitative	Qualitative
Concentrated readership	Varied audience
Highly structured genres	More fluid discourses

humanities. Although variations and overlapping are inherent qualities of a continuum, Hyland (2009) sums up these divisions in binary form (Table 8.2):

According to Rowley-Jolivet (2002), among the hard sciences, physics CPs require the most tinkering since these are more laboratory-controlled and, typically, have all variables accounted for. Geology requires the most observation, as samples may be scant or in poor condition, while medicine produces a greater number of unpleasant or surprising results. Medical research involves humans and thus includes lengthy randomized trials with which follow-up is necessary. As a result, medical (excepting experimental medicine) CPs tend to be presented at a more finalized stage, especially when the potential public impact is considered. Medical results are also often uncertain due to numerous unquantifiable, (human) variables, leading to greater degrees of hedging.

Cases in which these domains diverge in terms of genre-based discourse management will be noted throughout the book. As we have seen, the discourse of CPs and many other conference speech events occupies a midway point between the informal, speculative laboratory discussions and the conventionalized claims of the RP (Rowley-Jolivet, 2002). This type of midway claims are known as ‘proto-claims,’ and these are considered allowable in the ephemeral oral discourse of conference genre. For example, when contextual contingencies impinge on the research process, CPs can depict those features. The complex decision-making process behind the research also becomes a key part of the CP, even though it might be considered as, ‘unsanitized discourse’ (Rowley-Jolivet, 2002, p. 116). Admission of weaknesses in the CP narrative can also be seen as an insider or interactive strategy of the shared culture of conference participants.

This ‘testing’ function of CPs might particularly be welcomed by those looking to benefit from others’ insights and suggestions regarding their research. But this is also why CPs tend to carry less academic weight than publications. Conference English is ephemeral and non-citable, which tends to lead to more openness and frankness than in writing. Related to this is the fact that, at a conference, one is also more open to immediate public criticism. All of these factors distinguish conference spoken discourse from that of RPs.

Novelty is also a standard feature of conference discourse (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). Conference presentations focus upon recent results, whereas producing RPs can take months or years. Thus, the dissemination of preliminary, unfinished, ongoing research is prevalent at conferences, as conferences aid in

developing the RP for eventual publication. This connection between CP and the related journal publication demonstrates yet another feature of semiotic spanning.

RPs are, at the most fundamental level of description, constructed through the conventional positioning and conjoining of sentences and paragraphs—which typically involves the writer using a detached, impersonal tone. Three structural features contribute greatly to the establishment of this objective positioning: the use of complex nominal forms (complex noun groups), the passive voice, and extra-position (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003).

However, this is much less true for CP slides, which utilize a greater number of bullets, headers, and non-sentential descriptors, in short, metadiscourse forms. The CP presenter often further eschews the sentence–paragraph format (it may be argued that sentences do not really exist in speech) and, in speech, instead utilizes long, elaborate turns marked by indeterminate linguistic boundaries, leading to an increased reliance upon intonation or other paralinguistic features such as gestures, physical posture, and explicit discourse markers/signals to convey shifts or moves in the rhetoric.

We also need to consider Hyland's (2010) claim that there is a great need for an interactive voice in research writing and that, in fact, there is a greater 'orthodoxy of interactivity' today, replacing the primacy of objective or detached academic writing that previously held sway. This interactive voice is used to persuade or produce agreement between the writer/speaker and the audience. Although this voice is required in RPs, much more so is it needed in the CP. If the voice of the CP is too detached, the interpersonal dimension, necessitated by the real-time audience, is weakened. A more directed, less-distant approach is needed, utilizing the active voice and personal pronouns. As we will see, syntactical forms such as the use of pseudo-clefts, inversion, and existential forms help to realize the multimodal communicative function of CPs more effectively.

The need to use both interactive metadiscourse and syntactical forms that add a dialogical element to the CP was particularly pronounced when some conference presenters I observed were attempting to close slides or sections within the CP. The sudden switch from verbalizing sentential written text to elaborating or expanding upon bullet points as displayed on the slides left many such presenters floundering when trying to add a definitive ending to the bulleted items, resulting instead in a series of indeterminate or disconnected approximations (or what I will refer to as 'throwaway endings').

The small percentage of presenters I observed who read sentential text directly from the slides or from an accompanying sheet of notes tended to use less of these extralinguistic, metadiscoursal features, perhaps relying on the RP-styled syntax alone to convey the intended content. This effectively ignored the inherent multi-modal nature of the CP, and therefore often failed to supply the viewers/listeners with hints about the modality being employed or the intended direction of the rhetoric. In short, such CPs lacked the persuasive dimension.

This was also evident in those CPs where the speaker was actually seated throughout the entire CP (although these accounted for only 8 of the 293 total CPs I observed). Since the audience's focus was wholly upon the slides and screen, with the speaker's voice effectively providing little more than a voiceover function, the requirements of pacing, using explicit discourse markers, and employing more dynamic intonation in order to convey the narrative became even more paramount. Being seated during a CP might seem like a salve to the nervous presenter, but without additional prosodic detail to compensate for the decreased role of the speaker, the intended overall impact of the CP is more liable to fall flat.

Questions and Exercises for Section 8.2

1. Explain what the term 'proto-claims' means and why these are particularly common to conference CPs.
2. In what ways do the physical construction of presentation slides differ from the structure of discourse as found in written research papers?
3. List four basic differences between research CPs in the hard sciences and those of the humanities.

8.3 The Dialogic Dimension of Conference Presentations

One of the most interesting observations I made at humanities conferences was the high number of CPs that were performed as if they were multimodal defenses of Ph.D. theses, as if the presenter were a graduate student was appealing to a senior adjudicator. Such cases were certainly more frequent in comparison to the norm I encountered when I first began attending applied linguistics conferences about 20 years ago.

Related to this recent development is the lack of sense of narrative in many recent humanities CPs I've observed; that is a description of the speaker's progress or trials, failures, and revisions—the *process* of research. This would typically include an account of false turns, missteps, and problems encountered when performed in speech. It is therefore arguable that while the hard sciences are increasingly using an audience-inclusive narrative approach in their CPs, the same is slowly being ignored in or dropped from humanities' presentations—perhaps to instill a greater veneer of credibility by using the supposedly more detached, objective voice.

Written texts tend to carry a higher academic load (or density) than spoken texts (Coxhead, 2000), which increases the need for the academic speaker to express the same content in a succinct manner, but without the associated RP lexical density. In conference speech events, due to the emphasis on real-time exigencies and the dynamics of face-to-face interactions, the tenor typically associated with written research is often augmented by the inclusion of interpersonal markers. Among these metadiscourse features that tend to be more frequent in spoken modes, particularly in research CPs, are:

- *Attitude markers*: These are forms which allow a speaker to take a stand, or adopt a value position
- *Self-mention*: Hyland (2010) notes that the soft sciences in particular are saturated by first-person references
- *Engagement features*: These include the notions of stance and persuasion, particularly as evidenced in the use of both hedges and boosters
- *Reader pronouns*: The practice of bringing the audience into the discourse using the pronouns, *you*, *your*, and *we*
- *Directives*: These consist of three types—(a) textual (particularly procedures/instructions), (b) physical, ‘*Open the lid,*’ and (c) cognitive acts, ‘*Note X. Consider Y*’
- *Personal asides*: For example, ‘*Next—and I think this is something relevant to most of you—we looked at...*’
- *Appeals to shared knowledge*: For example, ‘*Of course, as we know...*’
- *Rhetorical questions*: For example, ‘*But we might ask ourselves, is it necessary to separate X and Y?*’

Much of what can be categorized as ‘interpersonal text’ in CPs are types of metadiscourse, the language that surrounds or helps to organize the core research text. Validity-oriented markers (such as approximators, hedges, or emphatics) were the most common types of metadiscourse noted in CPs (Heino, Tervonen, & Tommola, 2002). These were typically either self-, audience-, or community-oriented and indicate the speaker’s attitude toward the content, particularly in the use of evaluative and saliency (importance) markers and especially in the discussion and conclusion sections of the CP.

Context-oriented markers (references to situations or materials) were also significantly common in Heino et al’s study. These refer to the wider conference situation, and serve semiotic spanning or intertextual functions. Typically, these involved referring to other speakers and conference themes, as well as research materials.

Dudley-Evans (1994) was among the first scholars to distinguish the purely ‘reader-style’ CPs from more conversational (informal) or performer-styled forms, with the latter two approaches better capturing the sense of immediacy of an audience. Since that time, there has been a gradual move toward a more interactive focus in scientific CPs marked by the greater use of subject + active verbs and less use of the passive voice than found in RPs (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003, and Rowley-Jolivet, 2012), more discussion of failures (Thompson, 2002), more informal boundary markers, such as ‘*Ok,*’ (Webber, 2005), greater imprecision in numerating results (Dubois, 1987), more humor and self-irony (although my own observations would suggest this is largely limited to plenary and keynote speeches), less use of extraposition (i.e., ‘*it is clear/possible that...*’), which is more indicative of the impersonal RP tone, and far more use of existential forms (‘*there is/are*’) (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2001).

The metadiscourse of academic/scientific CPs is also marked frequently by hedging and other academic face-saving devices typical of an interactive setting, another feature that is distinct from the written mode (Heino et al., 2002). All these qualities point to the provisional and emergent nature of what is being presented.

However, the need for novelty (new information or data) in a scientific CP is not mitigated by this lowered degree of formalism. Scientific CPs tend to situate knowledge claims closer to their source (the researcher/speaker) than do RPs, which also adds to sense of communal participation and integration. Readers should note though that this is less common in humanities CPs, where handouts are more frequently provided and exemplar sentences are more likely to be accompanied by references.

Questions and Exercises for Section 8.3

1. Give three examples of how discourse may be managed in a ‘reader-style’ CP.
2. In what ways are CPs more provisional and ephemeral than written papers?
3. Explain the difference between reporting the research process versus the research ‘product.’

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