# KO Reports

## The Concept of Genre: When, How, and Why?

May 13th to 16th, 2001, the international, interdisciplinary conference "Genre 2001. Genres and Discourses in Education, Work and Cultural Life: Encounters of Academic Disciplines on Theories and Practices" was held at the Oslo University College, Olso, Norway (http://www.hio.no/LU/genre2001/index.html). As the title of the conference indicates, the concept of genre was at stake.

The conference was divided into paper sessions, symposia, keynote presentations, and lectures. Among the keynote lectures was the famous sociologist Thomas Luckmann. He is probably best known for co-authoring the book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of knowledge* (1966) together with Peter L. Berger. Luckmann's lecture was about the methodological implications of genre theory. Among other things, he discussed genre theory in relation to conversation analysis and argued heavily that genre-analytic methods do *not* use experimentally produced data.

Another keynote speaker was the British sociologist Norman Fairclough. He is particularly known for the development of critical discourse analysis (see for example *Discourse and Social Change* (1992)). Fairclough's lecture was (of course) about critical discourse analysis and its relation to genre theory. Fairclough attempted to illuminate how critical discourse analysis and genre theory are intertwined. Critical discourse analysis seeks to uncover the hegemonies, while the role of genres is to constitute the communicative activity in which various hegemonies are discursively expressed.

A third keynote speaker was Professor of English and Comparative Literature Paul Hernadi, University of California, Santa Barbara. Hernadi gave an interesting and amusing lecture called 'Triads, or tetrads: I, you, they, and we as interfacing perspectives in verbal communication'. In an almost Heideggerian way, Hernadi tried to show how the notions of 'I', 'you', 'they' and 'we' have entered into ordinary language use and their role in social practices.

The vast assembly of multiple and varied conference sessions made it, at times, difficult to get a hold of the concept of genre. This faceting of the concept implied, on the other hand, that one gained an insight into how different disciplines and domains studied and used the genre concept.

But what does the concept of genre cover? In *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, Freedman & Medway (1994, pp. 8-10) identify two major schools of thought within genre studies: The North American School and The Sydney School. The former derives its conception of genre from a rhetorical tradition. It is inspired by Carolyn R. Miller's seminal essay 'Genre as Social Action' (Miller, 1984) in which genre is conceptualized as 'typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations'. This leads the North American School of genre into a socio-historical genre concept. The Sydney School of genre is based in Michael A. K. Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. It puts emphasis on formal textual features and thus expresses a more linguistically oriented concept of genre. Common to both schools, however, is the attention paid to the role of the social in conceptualizing and understanding genres and the role of context (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 9). At the Oslo Conference many papers were inspired by the Halliday linguistic tradition.

Generally speaking, the concept of genre covers the characteristics that differentiate texts (verbal or written) from each other. For example, what makes one capable of distinguishing a textbook from a scholarly monograph is a question of genre. The textbook and the scholarly monograph have different social functions in written communication. These functions contribute to maintain a given communicative social practice. This is where the two schools of thought differ. The Sydney School would argue that their textual features could immediately read the genre status of a textbook and a scholarly monograph. The North American School would, however, argue that it is not solely these textual features that make it a genre. What makes it a genre is that the textual features are a response to a recurrent situation (a given social activity) that demands/expects the presence of these features in order for the genre to serve the social activities it historically has been developed for. This was what Charles Bazerman (1988) showed in his analysis of the experimental article in science. Bazerman paid particular attention to how this genre emerged historically and how it was, and is, shaped by the typified communicative activities of writers and readers, and how the genre shaped the

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knowledge producing activity into a typified activity exactly as a product of history. Thus, the North American School would not claim a separation of text and context, but would stress that text *is* context. This notion of text as context is also stressed by other genre scholars within the North American School such as Dorothy A. Winsor (1999) and David R. Russell (1997), both drawing on activity theory in their analyses of genre in relation to activity systems operating within school, society, and workplace settings.

In recent years, several writers within library and information science (LIS) have discussed the concept of genre. Elisabeth Davenport (1999) examined genres in connection with organizational communication and analyzed how genres contributed to structure that communication. She suggested that the concept of genre could be a useful concept for analyzing classification systems and their workings in diverse social settings. In an issue of the Bulletin of ASIST (2001), and as a consequence of a session on genre at the ASIST 2000 meeting, Clare Beghtol, Elaine Toms, and Barbara Kwasnik, Kevin Crowston, Michael Nilan & Dmitri Roussinov all provided some insights into the usefulness of genre in relation to knowledge organization. What they pointed to was that the social dimension of knowledge organization could be forcefully analyzed using genre as an analytical concept. Andrew Dillon & B.A. Gushrowsk (2000) discussed the homepage as the first unique digital genre, and Geoffrey Bowker & Susan Leigh Star (1999) pointed to some genre notions when they emphasized the ability of classification systems to function in certain settings as a response to these settings' power and communication structures.

Thus, the concept of genre seems to be getting its place in LIS theory. The concept of genre helps to illuminate an important relationship between social organization and knowledge organization. For instance, in recent years an emphasis and recognition of the significance of social context in information seeking studies has been accentuated. This stress on social context (or social organization) can be further examined, and understandings provided for, when analyzing the role of genres therein, because a variety of genres are presumably being applied in information seeking. Some of these are written genres and thus organized in knowledge organization systems, which again are part of the social organization. This should be welcomed since this will allow LIS theory to connect to other humanistic and social science fields, a connection that does not seem present at the moment.

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