From signs to semiosis—again

Is the study of genre still front line research?, 14–15 November 2013, Copenhagen

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Linguistics vs. literary studies

- I've studied both but am now quite firmly a linguist by profession

- Literary studies are directed towards the particular and the unique, linguistics towards the general and common

- Variability of texts (i.e., uniqueness, creativity) is not a *problem* for the genre scholar in literary studies

- BUT: A linguist wishing to integrate genres in a language description cannot just ignore it

Genre in (descriptive) linguistics

- How could linguistics describe the rules of not only the contextless sentences but also how people use language to make sense in real-life situations?

- Enter *genre*: the "typified social action"

  – Now variability becomes a problem!

  – Unless you intentionally limit your description (for methodological reasons, cf. Bazerman's lecture) but that's a poor way of doing research

Schaeffer (1989) on "essentialist fallacy"

- "Essentialist" genre theories (= the modern ones) are trying to define genres based on their textual features, thus in effect *reifying* the methodological tools

- Made a tremendous impact on me while I was writing my second MA thesis in comparative literature

- My interpretation: Instead of emphasizing the textual feature of a text in a given genre

- So we need to get out of the text, see the social repercussions of it: Carolyn R. Miller (1984)

Points to made in this presentation

- Too much attention is still spent on the *epistemology* of genres and too little on the *ontology* (i.e., *how* is genre testified in the text rather than *what* they are in discourse)

- Too often genres are seen as (static) *signs* instead of as (dynamic) *semiosis*; this is very much because of the Saussurean "semologic" heritage

- Perhaps the best description for genre would be that it *focuses the audience's attention* to certain parts of the de- and recontextualization of the text

Definitions of genre

- (proto-) typicality or representativeness of texts (Swales 1990, Fishelov 1993)
- socially constructed communicative models for the solution of everyday communicative problems (Luckmann 1992; Orlikowski & Yates 1994; Saukkonen 2001; Bhatia 2004)
- goal-orientated staged social processes (Ventola 1988; Martin 2000)
- constitutive (partial) sets of rules for the production and control of texts (Yates & Orlikowski 1992; Fishelov 1993; Sebeok & Danesi 2000; Taha 2004)
- forces organizing discourse reduncancies (Fowler 1982)
- norms describing and controlling the validity of texts (Kress 1987)
- crystallizations of the changing conventions of text production, text reception and discourse participants (Swales 1990; Kunelius 1993; Bex 1996)
- frameworks of directing attention towards production and reception of discourse (Paltridge 1997; Bauman 2001)
- situations to which a text responds (Kaufer 2006)
- practices which a writer participates in (Saariluoma 2000)
- socially or institutionally marked speech (Hymes 1974)
- devices controlling linguistic action and its contextual meaning (Lemke 1988)
- contextual limitations and production and reduction of texts (Frow 2005)
- use value (Beebee 1994)

Genre as genre attribution

- When someone says "I read a detective novel" or "I wrote a scientific article"…

  - Who's actually interested in the textual features of the text(s) mentioned?

  - What really happens is a social play: "you *read* a *novel*" ('laudable') "but it was a detective story" ('only entertainment'); "you did some science, eh?"

- Genre is often really an attribution: Here's a text. Please look at this way.

My PhD thesis (2010)

- My next target (inside "applied linguistics") were letters to the editor (from now on, "readers' letters")

- The material was specifically chosen because they are a "difficult" genre to describe

- I was hoping to point out that the "essentialist tendency" (Schaeffer 1989) of the then-current genre theory really does not work

- That is: in discourse genres work even if no one could formulate their textual patterns

Genre as a "front line" research concept

- My driving force was to lead linguistics out of the structuralist dead end: instead of representing languages essentially as lists of items and a set of (static) rules we need a more dynamic approach

- Many ways of expressing that goal: "evolutionary", "emergentist", "dialogistic", "integrational", or the "languaging" framework

- BUT: The only way ahead is to study DISCOURSE and integrate GENREs firmly inside linguistics!

Intuitive expectations of the readers' letters

- one, subjective point of view overarching the whole text

- one writer (sender) who's topic matters to him or his group of peers

- a comment on another text that's intertextualized in the present one

- the pragmatic proximity of the subject matter in time, place and discourse

- argumentativeness

- BUT: there are always texts that do not manifest *any* of these features—and that is the point I was hoping to make!

Are readers' letters a genre?

- Let's suppose I'm right and it's impossible to find a common denominator for the texts in the formal sphere:
  - *lexico-grammatically* they are as diverse as everyday speech
  - *rhetorically* it's difficult even to imagine the common structure
  - *functionally* we might argue they share something, but see the next slide
  - *contextually* they share a common context (the mass media) but they connect to its discourses in very different ways
- Even so, it would be counter-intuitive to say we don't have a "genre"—many counterarguments to that

Questioning the "function"

- Who determines the function of the text?
  - the original author?
  - the editorial board?
  - the owner(s) of the media?
  - the mass media institution?
  - the actual (or typical?) reader?
- Different (ideas of the) functions might conflict with each other
- Also there's no knowing of the "ultimate intentions" of the people involved!

The "epistemology" of genre
I.e., the hunt for the formal characteristics

- Genres cannot really be *defined* by their features —but cf. Wittgenstein on ostensive definitions: we already knew that from language!

- Of course I fully understand why features arouse interest: there is the applied point of view (i.e., teaching of writing)

- But to fully appreciate genres in discourse one has to look "inside" them: What they *do* instead of how do they *appear*

"Nexus" of context and text

- Genre is situated both in the context and the text: they form a "nexus"
  - The contextual and the textual might support or complete with each other
  - But ultimately the context always wins
- Genre's existence (which Croce doubted) is proven by *reactivity*: it's not only "analyzed in" the text, it also *affects* the reception of the text
- That means genre is a *normative* object or even a *language* in the wide sense of the word

The "ontology" of genre
What does it do in discourse?

- You cannot really explain the word "red" (without using the word)... so don't expect to be able to explain a genre like "readers' letters"

- (The analogy between semantics and genres was what lead me from literary studies to linguistics)

- Genres are "*constitutive*" in the sense that they open up new ways of meaning, not just new ways of expressing pre-existing meanings

- Genre is a way of expressing *what you do with* the text: it is targeted toward socially meaningful actions

"Pure" description vs. applications

- Now a question arises:
  How to get a scientifically acceptable description and at the same time be practical enough for the descriptions to have real applicability?

- My answer was to turn into Peircean semiotics

  - For Peirce, practicality (or applicability) is not a thing aside—it's the actual target of an investigation

  - It also ensures we can get rid of static signs while still making sure the explanation of semiotically based
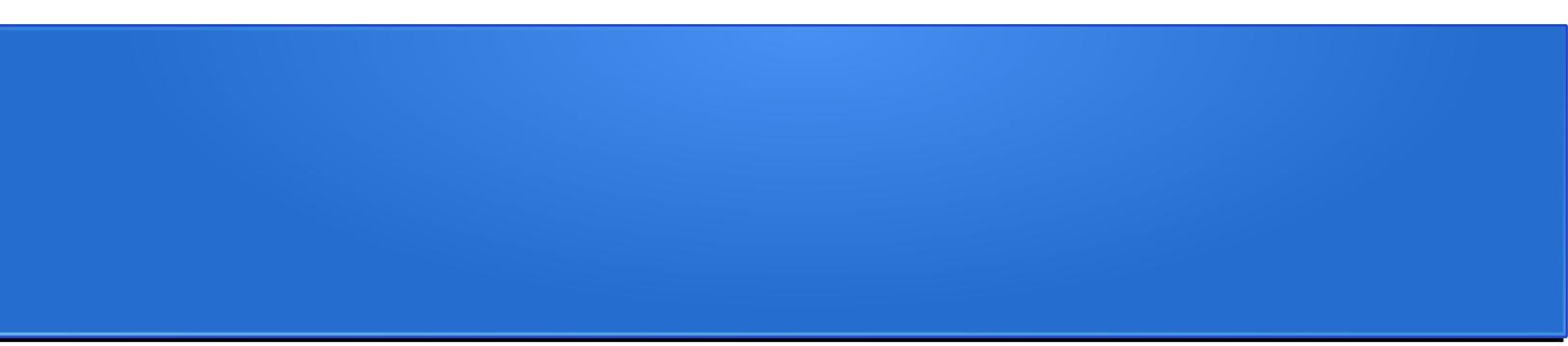
'[T]he entire meaning and significance of any conception lies in its conceivably practical bearings' (Peirce, EP, 2.145, the so called "maxim of pragmatics")

Sign vs. semiosis, again
Peircean framework

- An actual interpretation of a sign (its *dynamic interpretant* in Peircean parlance) always opens up a specific point of view

- The conditions for successful interpretation always lie *outside* the sign—genre (being the text's interpretant) is never fully *inside* the text (cf. Bazerman 1994: genre features have power only if recognized as such)

- Sadly there's no time to really formulate the Peircean aspect here but to sum up: in Peircean semiotics, signs are always subordinate to semiosis

- Interpretation is always dynamic
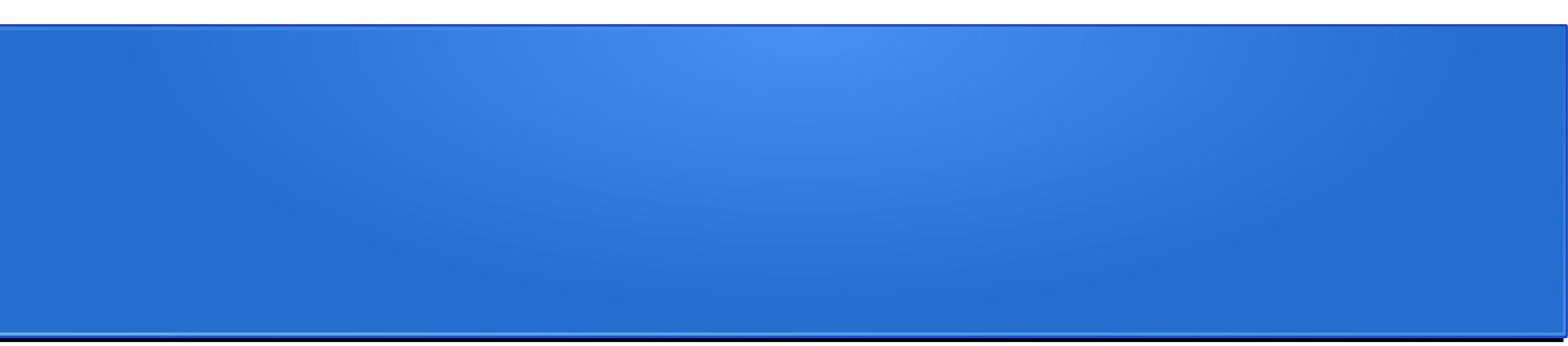
Thank you for your attention!