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Genres in new economies of language

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Abstract: This article suggests that one of the understudied and substantive ways in which actors produce and transform social hierarchies and classifications is by aligning and mis-aligning genres. Alignments within and across genres have furnished methods for construing and evaluating qualities of people – as examples, the genre repertoires of job applications or promotion dossiers. A fine attunement to new and emergent semiotic alignments via genres can also reveal how people are engaging with social and technological transformations. To study this, we advocate turning to four focal points: shifting genre hierarchies, stabilizing genres, cross-genre identities, and empty genres.

Keywords: genres; social change; value

In his essay on speech genres, Bakhtin (1986) noted that speech genres are “the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language” (65). For Bakhtin, certain genres came to define or “set the tone” of literary language more broadly, embedding norms and understandings about meaning, addressivity, and function that went largely unnoticed but were vital in shaping the production of language. Bakhtin introduced to linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics an orientation to situating sets of genres within ideological frames connected to and situated within history (see, among others, Bauman 1999; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Briggs 1993; Hanks 1987). In developing Bakhtin’s ideas further, these scholars discussed how “the capacity of genre to create textual order, unity and boundedness” and, conversely, fragmentation and disorder that “can be invoked to varying degrees” dependent on one’s participant role “is of profound interactive, ideological and political-economic significance” (Bauman and Briggs 1992: 156). Since the early 1990s, genre has fallen a bit out of fashion as an analytical tool to wield. In this piece, we suggest that there is much at stake in thinking with genres again to

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understand the relationship between large-scale social changes and language on the ground, and directions yet to explore.

Curiously, the work of pushing forward ideas on the complexity of how genres interact in practice has been developed more broadly outside of the field, in studies of the history and sociology of organizational communication, such as by JoAnne Yates, Wanda Orlikowski, Clay Spinuzzi and others (see Orlikowski and Yates 1994; Spinuzzi 2004; Yates and Orlikowski 1992). Much of this work has centered on untangling the complexity of how named genre types work together in contemporary workplaces – things like quarterly reports, brainstorming meetings, voicemail messages, email greetings, post-it notes, and water-cooler talk. These scholars derived a great deal of traction by emphasizing that genres in practice never appear as singular objects; rather people are immersed in a sea of written, oral, and participatory genres that are mobilized together towards specific ends.

This work has produced a rich terminology for describing these interactions: workplaces can be genre ecologies of different genre types, in which employees develop their own genre repertoires of competence and performance, and work to enact different genres for specific goals. In building on this body of work and connecting it to contemporary issues in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, we want to suggest that one of the understudied and substantive ways in which actors produce and transform social hierarchies and classifications is by aligning and mis-aligning genres. All too often, contestations over larger structural shifts or social organization are enacted through negotiations around how genres are interconnected locally and in daily interactions. These contestations within and around genres make visible different forms of authority and processes of decision-making in organizations and communities. In this short piece, we argue for turning to the dynamics of genre interactions within a broader social focus on language as a productive lens for studying social change and its accompanying frictions. Even amid rapid changes to sociolinguistic sites, institutional registers, and value hierarchies around language varieties, genres remain key anchors of conventionality. To take a typical “new media” example, online Internet forums are replete with conventional genres of greeting, letter writing, debate, insult, citation, and adjudication. Likewise, social media profile pages are complex assemblages of visual and textual genres (for example, the profile picture, “about me” descriptions, hobbies). And new user communities are developing around genre activities of sharing, reproducing, and imitating circulated content (see Jones 2009).

These kinds of media are not of interest, we would suggest, because they have qualities of “newness” or because they rely on or blend “old” genres; rather, they offer productive yet unexplored terrain for linking linguistic and semiotic complexity on the ground with broader macro-level phenomena. Contemporary

genre performances are more complex, occur across multiple modalities, reference multiple layers of interdiscursive citation, and require multiple literacies to interpret. Metapragmatic labels to describe these new phenomena (“viral” content, for instance) belie dense token-type interactions across multiple genres. A fine attunement to new and emergent semiotic alignments via genres can reveal how people are engaging with social and technological transformations.

Genre alignments are also linked to emergent ways of construing economic and cultural value. News stories in 2020 are replete with cases of employees losing their jobs or job prospects over TikTok videos in which they shared racist content. Alignments within and across genres have furnished methods for construing and evaluating qualities of people. These forms of value are not premised on classic sociolinguistic tokens of in-group membership, such as shibboleths, accents, or emblems, but emerge through differentials created across genres, such as one’s self-presentation in a cover letter versus on Twitter. This kind of semiotic analysis has been familiar to scholars of religion, where calibration among genres like chanting, prayer, and sermon help to constitute religious subjectivities (see Eisenlohr 2010; Shoaps 2002). Such analytical tools could be fruitfully extended to other sociolinguistic sites.¹

As scholars of language in contemporary capitalist institutions, we can ask how new kinds of cross-genre formations are being used in new kinds of value projects, and thus shifting how groups gatekeep or privilege certain practices and identities. How, for example, are multiple genres used to perform market-favorable identities, and conversely, how might they help to categorize labor qualities across things like résumés, interviews, online profiles, and social media? Or, in a similar vein, what does it mean that organizations are now signaling themselves to be progressive across multiple genres and channels, challenged often by the different audience demands of a range of genres and media? In organizational worlds, we are already seeing new constellations of democratic genres of participation (such as town hall meetings, open company forums, 360° feedback, and informal conversational norms), alongside attempts to align with genres on new social media platforms in which employees are co-performers (see Turco 2016).

Just as Bakhtin was keenly aware of the value-laden dimensions by which genres were hierarchically ordered, we call attention to what new dimensions of ideology, power, and value are being invoked within capitalist sites. How might new genre formations be part of new ideological projects to project multiple

¹ Alignment and calibration, both explicit (through metapragmatic discourse) and implicit (through co-textual poetics) have long been features of sociolinguistic analysis. These have been more commonly analyzed at the level of face-to-face interaction (Silverstein 1993), and we are interested in extending these to other kinds of participatory genres across modalities and media.

corporate voices so as to deflect criticism, leaving behind the mono-vocal corporate voice of the past (see Marchand 1998)? How does the pressure to master multiple genres in one's job search reflect increasing amounts of individual responsibility, articulating at the interactional level some of the larger socio-economic shifts in how capitalism should be enacted (Gershon 2017, 2018)? To understand how changing capitalist practices are moving towards diversification and customization for some market niches (while relying on some forms of homogenization and standardization when moving across global value chains), we might begin to explore how linguistic practices and reflexive analysis of these practices enable a rigorous and ethnographically grounded exploration of what stays the same and what transforms (and how) in contemporary capitalist practices.

While seen often as only ancillary to the putatively real work of capitalist production, exchange, and consumption, genre work itself has foregrounded itself as a heightened concern. Prentice has recently described how Korean office workers see their work as a matter of PowerPoint production, in which documents lose their qualities of reference to production figures and become associated with the people and social environment surrounding their production (Prentice 2019). Korean office workers describe their offices as “a culture of reports”, in which work is understood as writing various sub-genres of reports. The analytic dynamic is not one of type-token, in which workers attempt to align a given PowerPoint with a global prestige variety for local differentiation, but one in which written genres act as complex signs of sociocultural appropriateness and individual competence. Other genres in the office, like email and face-to-face meetings, become part of the orbit of PowerPoint in creating conditions of favorable reception.

We might observe that many of the genres used in markets, organizations, and industries have not changed from those used more than a century ago, such as memos, surveys, meetings, and reports. Yet how people make use of and align these genres has been transformed as ways of organizing business and labor have shifted. Certain genre alignments and calibrations become signs of the times, such as the way the blending of work genres with home/personal genres suggests a “corporatization” of life (see Fleming 2014). To foreground the active role that genres can continue to play as orienting points for analyzing social change, especially when analyzing transformations in capitalism, we wish to conclude by suggesting four focal areas that sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists might find valuable to study.

- **Shifting genre hierarchies:** The work of Bakhtin has been central to culturally grounded genre analysis, but his legacy has left scholars with the assumption that some genres are more authoritative than others. While

organizations used to be organized around the production of these authoritative genres, recent ethnographic research has highlighted how low genres, like casual speech, tweeting, or texting also shape organizational communication ecologies. This shift reflects new language ideologies in which stylistic distinctions with the past signal a rejection of formal authority, mediation, and authority, but we might ask how broader genre ecologies, as well as individual genre repertoires, are being re-organized, and by whom. Which genres are seen as basic and necessary in any given sociolinguistic environment? What new value hierarchies have emerged? What forms of literacy are participants expected to wield, and what prices do they pay for perceived inabilities?

- **Stabilizing genres:** It is commonplace to think of genres like tools available for someone to pick up and use for different functions, but as semiotic productions, any genre requires acts of calibration and stabilization for it to be recognized and circulated. There are challenges inherent in keeping the meaning of some genres stable in an era of shifting legitimacy and authority. Where performative utterances were once seen as the primary way of stabilizing meaning in the economy (see, for instance, Holmes 2009), it is becoming clear that other genres play a significant role in shoring up meaning. A significant amount of extra genre work goes into legitimizing and crafting low genres, from the highly paid management of corporate voices on Twitter to efforts to craft one's social media profiles while looking for a job. We suggest that exploring how genres interact involves also understanding how people turn to a range of genres, aligned just so, to produce a sense of authoritative discourse. The converse is also true – people seeking to undermine larger institutional aims may misalign genres in the hopes that the dissonance will function as sufficient resistance.
- **Cross-genre identities:** Genres in themselves situate actors in conventionalized forms of participation, addressivity, and authorship. However, identity as an institutional category is “made up” across multiple genres that assemble different qualities of persons. As privileged genres have been de-centered, information democratized, and new forms of competence valued, situated analysis of single genres or texts may only provide part of a picture of identity formation. Speech communities or institutional environments may now look on multiple genres in a wider genre ecology to perform identities or evaluate others'. This reminds scholars of the importance of long-term and embedded ethnographic methods to observe these processes across sites, events, and media.
- **Empty genres:** Where we associate genres with both form and content, in contemporary capitalism, much genre work appears to “lack” content. Highly

regimented forms for job interview questions, personal branding efforts, or workshops on diversity or innovation may involve a lot of work, but may appear as empty gestures that have little to no bearing on work itself. These are nevertheless highly productive for different ritual purposes in business contexts (Wilf 2016) and much rides even on these generic performances. A genre's relationship to content may no longer be a key determinant for how influential it is, or how it is integrated into a broader genre ecology. Instead, we need to develop other analytical tools for understanding how these genres circulate in patterned forms.

These four areas have implications for how researchers think about both field and analytical methods in new kinds of sociolinguistic sites and contexts. We do not see them as a radical departure from a longer history of socially embedded, ethnographic studies of language, however. Moving beyond universal categories of "everyday speech" and "linguistic exchange" towards local understandings of genres of speaking and communication was a key element in the early ethnography of speaking tradition (Bauman and Sherzer 1989 [1974]: xii). We ask scholars of language to consider how the language forms they analyze are situated within specific genres, and how in turn such genres are situated within a wider ecology or repertoire that research participants might be expected to learn, perform, or recognize. How might the crisscrossing of these multiple genres in practice provide new grounds for participants to reflexively shape their own identities, judge the qualities of others, or interpret the state of their community or organization?

We have been discussing in broad strokes how turning to the ways people align and mis-align multiple genres can encourage scholars to ask a range of innovative questions around capitalism and social power. The rise in multi-genre activity in contemporary capitalism raises significant questions about the wider role of language in these processes. As scholars of language and political economy have long noted, there is never a direct line between economic forms and linguistic forms (Gal 1989: 361). We can see how the coordination of multiple genres may be used to *expand* institutional power into new areas of communicative practice (think here of Google's reach into multiple facets of communication technologies) as well as *subvert* demands for authenticity (think here of the widespread availability of templates, scripts, ghostwriter services, and consultants available to craft one's image). Scholarly attention now could be productively paid to how people distinguish recognizable genres, how they locate and engage with cross-genre assemblages, repertoires, and formations, and how classificatory categories, such as identity categories, are calibrated – or hidden – institutionally through genre work.

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