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Genre analysis: The state of the art

(An online interview with Vijay Kumar Bhatia)

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In this interview, Vijay Bhatia freely reflects on his personal experiences, perceptions, and views about the development of Genre Analysis in the early eighties towards Critical Genre Analysis today. He offers his impressions about how professionals construct, interpret, use and often exploit generic resources in their everyday practice to meet their professional objectives in specific contexts. Starting from the early conceptualization of Genre in the eighties in the United Kingdom, he points out how it was essentially inspired by the everyday concerns about the teaching and learning of English for Specific Purposes, and how it continued to gain popularity and is considered one of the most popular frameworks for ESP applications in the present-day context. However, he points out, it is not enough to analyze and describe just the specialist discourses; it is also equally important to understand how such discourses are employed in professional practice to meet specific requirements of a particular profession. Hence the need to develop traditional Genre Analytical framework further towards what he calls Critical Genre Analysis to demystify interdiscursive performance in specific academic and professional settings.

Keywords: Genre Analysis; Critical Genre Analysis; Applied Linguistics; ESP; Interdiscursive Performance

The Interview

MASN:[1] How would you define the field of Genre Analysis today? How is it different from traditional Greek rhetorics? What are its basic tenets?

VKB:[2] Genre Analysis today is one of the three somewhat different, though

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with considerable overlapping, approaches to the study of various forms of discourse, particularly in academic and professional contexts. The first of these approaches, popularly known as the American tradition, draws its inspiration largely from the studies of classical Greek rhetoric (Miller, 1984), whereas the second one draws its strengths from Systemic-Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994). The third approach, popularly known as the British Tradition was an attempt to study academic and professional discourses for the design and implementation of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) programmes in the United Kingdom and the a number of other English as a second language (ESL) learning contexts. I have been part of this last tradition and would like to focus primarily on the developments in this approach.

Genre, in this tradition, is primarily viewed as a conventionalised and largely standardized communicative event defined in terms of its communicative purpose that a genre is meant to serve in a specific academic or professional setting (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990).

So far as the Traditional Greek Rhetoric is concerned, it was primarily meant to help ordinary people to argue their claims in the court of law, i.e., to persuade authorities and to influence decision-making in their favor. Most modern theories of discourse analysis seem to have been influenced by the key rhetorical principles of 'Logos' as the use of logical arguments, 'Ethos' to create an emotional reaction, and 'Pathos' to create a reliable and convincing impression. However, Genre Analysis has never made any direct reference to these notions at any time, as far as I am aware of. The American Tradition of rhetorical genres however, has been largely inspired by this in various ways.

MASN: What kind of interface do you see between discourse analysis, pragmatics, and genre analysis?

VKB: Discourse Analysis as the study of language use beyond sentence boundaries was primarily inspired by some of the broad tenets of Pragmatics, in particular, to bring context within the scope of analysis and interpretation, which has been a very significant development in the study of meaning. Genre Analysis is only a way of analysing, interpreting, and accounting for some of the discursive actions taking place in specific academic and professional contexts, and considers context and any form of specific genre knowledge as an important contributor to its understanding of genre.

MASN: What is the interface between genre analysis and applied linguistics on the one hand, and ESP on the other?

VKB: In my view, applied linguistics was originally used to refer to the application of linguistics for language teaching, including English for Specific Purposes (ESP); however, in the last several years, the concept has broadened quite significantly to include the study of language use in a variety of other contexts, which means that we need to redefine the notion of applied linguistics, to include the use of language in organisational, management, institutional as well as other Business Communication contexts. In my own work, I have used genre analysis to study corporate disclosure documents and practices, and also colonisation of arbitration practices by litigation practices, which have been possible because of the relevance of (critical) genre analysis to account for such professional communicative practices (Bhatia, 2008a, 2008b). In addition, it is also possible to use genre analysis to understand and account for certain aspects of translation and interpretation practices, and document and information design issues. All these contexts can be validly studied and analysed through discourse and genre analysis, and hence can be viewed as important aspects of applied linguistics.

MASN: If you want to give our readers a helicopter sight of genre analysis, (1) what distinct areas within genre analysis would you perceive, (2) how are they connected or different, and (3) what is their chronological sequencing?

VKB: If we consider Genre Analysis as the study of language use in specific academic and professional contexts, and focus primarily on the specialist discourses in such contexts, then we are essentially limiting ourselves to discursive acts, which are valid and are considered crucially relevant resources for the study of professional actions. However, it only offers significant, though limited opportunities for the exploration and understanding of what is practiced in academic and professional communication. What it does not tell us is why most of the members of a professional community construct, interpret, use, and exploit linguistic resources, the way they do. The most important question for us is 'why do the professionals write the way they do?' This also means that there is a vast area beyond the discursive practice, which includes not only professional practice, but also the professional or disciplinary culture, which we need to be taken into account.

Moreover, in order to make things easier to understand in pedagogical contexts, we often focus on ideal forms of discourse, conveniently underestimating the role of genre mixing, embedding or even bending of generic norms in real life contexts (Bhatia, 1997, 2004). We often simplify things for focusing on pure genres, whereas in real life situations, genres are most often found in hybrid forms. So in my view, we need to focus more on the complexity and dynamicity of genres, rather than on the purity of such discursive configurations. The most important aspect of this kind of expansion of scope will be to deepen our understanding of contexts in which such genres are embedded.

Although in pedagogical situations, it is often necessary to begin with ideal or less complex forms, one should realise that it is only the beginning and not the end of application. By going beyond the classroom, we can move closer to the real world, which is much more complex than what we assume in the context of the classroom.

MASN: I know that you have opted for a new field, which you call Critical Genre Analysis; what are its basic tenets? How is it different from or related to genre analysis practiced before it? What are its merits? What was your motivation for theorizing it, and why do you see it as important?

VKB: I do not consider Critical Genre Analysis as a new field; it is a development on, and advancement of the genre analytical framework we have been using for more than 35 years. It became obvious to me after working on a number of research projects at the turn of the Century that if we want to understand or what I have often said to demystify academic and professional discourses, we need to go well beyond the mere analysis and description of language use and widen considerably the notion of context in which such discursive acts take place. This involves a closer and much deeper look at the professional practice of specialists, paying particular attention to what I have often referred to as 'discursive performance', which is invariably realised interdiscursively because of the increasing involvement of interdisciplinary practices and contexts. Essentially, it involves looking at professional practice, in addition to professional discourse. It is not, in any way, undermining the conventional genre analysis, but going beyond it to have a closer and deeper look at what makes it possible for specialists not only to construct professional discourses but also to achieve their professional objectives the way they do.

If we were to compare Critical Genre Analysis with conventional Genre Analysis, then we find that earlier on we have always focused on genres, whereas now we tend to go beyond it and incorporate professional practice within our frame of reference in an attempt to understand what makes these discursive actions possible and pragmatically successful. In doing so, we also tend to pay more attention to interdiscursive aspects of such actions, rather than just the intertextual aspects (Bhatia, 2010). The focus has also shifted from analysis of genres, though without in any way undermining it, to explanation of how genres are exploited to achieve professional actions, paying particular attention to hybridization of genres and professional practices and disciplinary cultures. It must be noted here that most of these additional aspects of this development take analysis of genres towards analysis of context. On the whole, one may view Critical Genre Analysis as analysis of contexts, over and above that of Genre.

It is a very important development, in my view, because it allows one to go beyond linguistic and rhetorical analysis to the analysis of contextualisation, which allows us to bridge the widening gap between the idealisation, typical of classroom, and the complex realities of the professional world.

MASN: What sorts of considerations does one need to take into account when undertaking research in critical genre analysis? What are the possible pitfalls for researchers who undertake such research? How can these pitfalls be avoided?

VKB: One of the main areas of confusion could be the use of the word 'critical' in Critical Genre Analysis (CGA) and also in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). However, the term is used in two very different senses in the two frameworks, though there could be some areas of overlap. Although in both the frameworks, the focus is on 'practice', in CDA, it is used as the study of wider social practices, whereas in CGA, it is used in narrowly defined and contextually grounded contexts of professional and disciplinary practices, which are essentially genre-based. The term critical in CDA is used to investigate 'hidden connections between language, power and ideology, especially the way abuse, dominance, inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted in socio-political contexts' (Fairclough, 1989, p. 5), whereas in CGA, the term critical reflects deeply grounded explanatory analysis, which is analytic rather than ideological interpretation. In CDA, context is often viewed as pre-

determined intention of the analyst, whereas CGA is undertaken to account for and explain contextualization. CDA tends to pay more attention to the analyst's interpretation of a text, and very little attention to the varied ways a text can be produced, interpreted, and even exploited in a variety of contexts by different audiences, which raises the issues of subjective, partial or even prejudicial interpretations, whereas CGA tends to provide a deeply grounded explanatory analysis, which intends to provide discursive performance of specialists in well-defined professional contexts, keeping in mind not only the use of discursive resources, but also their typical disciplinary and professional cultures.

The other most important characteristic aspect of CGA is that it invariably focuses on interdiscursive aspects of genre construction, interpretation and exploitation as most professional discourses seem to be very rich in interdiscursivity, in addition to intertextuality. In doing CGA, it is necessary not to undermine the analysis of linguistic resources but to take it as a starting point and then go on to professional and disciplinary practices. A very important resource for the study of professional practice is the use of ethnographic procedures (Smart, 1998), which Swales (1998) calls 'textography', as it essentially allows one to have a closer look at the intentions, motivations and other aspects of genre construction and exploitation.

MASN: What criticism would you level against traditional views of genre analysis? What criticism (if any) would you expect to be levelled against your theory of critical genre analysis? How would you resolve them?

VKB: I think traditional Genre Analysis has been a powerful theoretical framework used very successfully for several decades and is still one of the most popular frameworks for pedagogical applications to language teaching at the post-secondary levels; however, when we look at the discursive practices in the real world of professions, it seems to be a bit constraining in that it fails to adequately account for the realities of the complex world, thus leaving a significant gap between what we undertake in the classroom and what happens in the outside world, which often confronts us as teachers when we get reactions from the professional world. In order to bridge this gap, we need to develop genre theory beyond its traditional concerns, and CGA can be viewed as a move towards this end.

What sort of criticism do I expect of CGA? It is difficult to think of

what might happen in the next ten years or so. I became aware of these constraints about Genre Analysis only after I finished writing my second book (Bhatia, 2004) on genre theory. CGA is still in its early years and we need to wait to see to what extent it can answer the questions we confront now or will do so in future.

MASN: Which direction(s) do you think genre analysis studies will take in future?

VKB: In my estimate, genre theory from various other manifestations such as those in rhetorical studies and the SFL inspired studies (Martin, 1985) and the CGA will benefit from one another and will do particularly well if they go in the direction of integrated enrichment. This is also made possible today because of the much wider acceptance of multiperspective and multidimensional approaches to discourse analysis (Bhatia, 2008b; Smart, 1998).

MASN: What are the implications of genre analysis in general, and critical genre analysis in specific, for ESP on the one hand, and for Applied Linguistics on the other?

VKB: As I mentioned earlier, although Genre Analysis was initially inspired by ESP, it soon started contributing to other forms of language teaching, especially Business Communication and various other professional contexts, such as organisational, management and corporate communication. Similarly, it is now being widely used to analyse non-pedagogical aspects of the professional world, in particular the study of institutions, organisations, and other forms of corporate behaviour (Bhatia, 2006; Devitt, 1991; Nickerson, 1998, 2005) as in the study of corporate disclosure practices, colonisation of arbitration practices (Bhatia, 2008a; Bhatia, Candlin & Gotti, 2012), on-stage and off-stage performance in medical practice (Barton, 2004), translation and interpretation, and also information design. These developments have made it necessary and possible to redefine the traditional notion of Applied Linguistics, widening it considerably. These are interesting developments and are likely to open up new areas of applied linguistics.

MASN: Do you have any recommendation to make?

VKB: All I can say is that although we have gone a long way, the best is yet to be, as they say. The future of Critical Genre Analysis, Critical

Discourse Analysis, and Applied Linguistics is full of excitement and new possibilities as long as we keep our minds open, and keep looking for more interesting and insightful answers to the questions we have been bothered about for a long time.

MASN: Thank you very much for accepting this interview invitation. It means a lot to me and the readers of the journal. You are an Icon, and it was a huge honor for me to be able to conduct this interview. Thank you.

VKB: Thank you for inviting me. It has been a real pleasure talking to you.

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