

## LANGUAGE CHANGE IN INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSES. GENRE-BASED APPROACHES

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**Abstract:** The paper starts from the basic assumption that genres are socially linked, and shall refer to those circumstances in which language changes due to historical, social and cultural factors, maintaining the need for a structural perspective with sets of rules stressing the right genre interpretations, yet focusing on language functional use in defining discourse in institutional settings. Therefore, we shall discuss elements such as time, space or protagonists which contribute to language change. The paper aims to explain how such controlling factors will connect language-genre-discourse in institutional settings, delimiting specific genres by forcing language change to (re)adapt to new contexts.

**Keywords:** Communication; genre; institutional setting; language.

### 1. Introduction

Language use is determined by the communicative prospects, the stated objective(s) which must also be predetermined by the institutional principles and rules. A good communicator will always make use of all the elements which set a meaningful communication, no matter the genre. Institutional discourses are displayed in particular settings that must be accounted for in genre communication. These settings are predetermined by historical, social and cultural factors that are limited to the contexts of the communication and obviously by internal/ external factors: space, time, protagonists.

While there are correlations between institutions, there is also complexity as a result of participant influence in time and space. Discourse is inextricably linked to the influence of its participants in other systems, as evidenced by text creators, distributors, and receivers; as a result, discourse, social practices, and cultural practices all contribute to the formation of group identities. That is, the participants who establish norms also consider the specifics of how they should be followed. They all seek to influence recipients; they primarily seek to influence outcomes in accordance with institutional norms and regulations. Such actions are possible because they involve participants in determining which other discourses are used and, thus, which discursive issues and formal social situations a single subject encounters, in order for participants to gain access to them and thus gain a better understanding of the institution's social environment (or its discourse). Additionally, participants involved in persuasive discourses should consider external influences. Everyone who participates in public institutional discourse is attempting to persuade others. Finally, social dominance is

exemplified by the daily replication of social interactions in conversation by social participants acting as members of groups and representatives of patterned structures.

At the heart of effective communication are strategies and techniques. Language, we believe, is an extremely persuasive tool. Changes in context can have a significant effect on discourse and language usage, as determined by protagonists and their relationships, as well as genre relationships, which can have a profound effect on the message and presentation.

## **2. Language Change in Genre Communication**

Communication is when people use language to transmit information to another person or other people, or from institution to institution, the purpose being that of rendering meaning to actions based on real experiences. In spoken language situations, the speaker, the listener, the situational context, and the social structure are all inextricably linked (Hoey & Stubbs, 2007). It is an interactive activity specific to human beings, but dependent on the context and situation. The interactions can be determined by small linguistic units, utterances, which can be grouped into bigger units, texts. There is an obvious connection between texts and discourses; hereof, the way speakers interact verbally as well as how writing can influence audience reception of a speaker's point of view is of utmost importance (Martin & Rose, 2007). We can argue that the delimitation between them is given only by the level of interaction in communication, and the way the message is transmitted: written or spoken.

Mental and linguistic actions that represent reality at the cognitive level, assembles communication in interactions, as a means of sending and receiving information using linguistic signs or non-verbal utterances. We can speak about an act of communication only when we have a goal: the producer wants to deliver/ share a message to the receiver. The producer and receiver can be people, they can be people and organizations/institutions, or institution and institution. The message can be within the organization or outside it. In any of the cases both the producer and the receiver will need a system to encode the utterances, a homogenized system which must take into consideration the social contexts (space) and elements of communication such as time or protagonists, which must be adequately understood by the receivers. We think that setting is important to establish a proper system, bearing in the scope of creation those circumstances in which language change due to social and cultural factors. Whether we refer to verbal or written communication, language use change in respect to the contextual need and this need is always related to socio-cultural and also educational urges, giving raise to genres.

Communication is at the core of any institution, setting the functioning premises to achieve a goal with a specific social system, given by the contexts and its members. Consequently, the number of members will always come with different types of communication, as each of them bring their own set of values, background knowledge and culture. As a result, all types of communications must be organized so as the outcome could be coherent and have cohesion. This should be organized internally, within the institution and externally, with outside protagonists and other institutions. Due to all the elements involved and also the need for structure, the exchange of information should be strictly committed to the aims of the communication. Institutional discourses

are subjected to formal settings of predetermined texts, formally or informally delivered and produced to attain the aims designed. If we have already established texts with specific aims, then the language used must be standardized as well, its functions adapted to the needs of the institution. No matter the setting, internal or external communication, language use must adapt to it and trigger the proper message. Fairclough (2003) focuses his attention on texts and how social agents relate them, putting more emphasis on producing texts (acknowledging it) than on reading or interpreting them. Institutional discourses function on the idea that standardized language is capable of incorporating other social factors in delivering the message conveyed in the objectives.

Written institutional discourses are dependent on the specific text genre (letters, reports, proposals, etc.) that are formalized for the benefit of its protagonists: producers, receivers, groups, organizations. Institutional discourses need all these to ensure the correct message delivering in the right structural frame and under the right goals. Social assumptions, culture and beliefs should be accounted for in institutional discourses and language should function as an adapter to all the requirements of internal and external communication at this level. Written, spoken and visual discourse is characteristic of a particular institutional setting or situation. What distinguishes every day interactions from institutional utterances are the lexical choice and institutionally specific references to desired attainable goals.

At the beginning of the 1960s, linguists began the exploration of the role of communication situations by means of texts. At this point we have texts that stand at the basis of any communication, through a communicative social act. By 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s texts genres began to be approached from the cognitive perspective, so texts “analyses resulted in knowledge of mental concepts and models in linguistic structures” (Jurin & Krišković, 2017: 19). If we think of texts as social outcomes, then texts are communicative events, not merely sequences of spoken or written words. Texts become models of understanding real activities, getting information about “extralinguistic reality” (utterances, facts, actions). In addition, texts interrelate with what knowledge or experience the individuals possess, their own identity and elements of time and space or observational setting. Discourse analysis is entirely contextual in nature, as conversation entails situational knowledge in addition to the words spoken (Renkema, 2009). Events must be acknowledged first in order to be recognized and easy to observe. All the small units that characterize a distinct text form the genre.

Genres are socially and deeply connected with the various meanings that words can have in many specific social and cultural contexts. Genres are observable communicative events, featuring a set of communicative reasons observed and understood by all members of the institution in which they normally occur. Although genres are difficult to be defined, they always represent what is said or written in a social reality, and are subjected to change due to the other changes in the social life, language use included. As language is represented by all combinations of linguistic signs that make a text, it needs a certain structured pattern to follow and make the events understood. It is what makes texts and turn them into meaningful communicative units. Members of a particular institution will better understand the genres as they share the common knowledge that allows that. They are mirroring the disciplinary and organizational cultures, and as a consequence, they focus on social actions rooted in

disciplinary institutional practices with an internal way of functioning deeply interrelated with textual, discursive and contextual factors.

In institutional discourses genres explain the patterned variability. Such genre patterns connect institutions with the social worlds and make the discourse profitable for both producers, owners, and the receivers. They delimit specific tasks and narrow the scope up to a meaningful contextual unit. Members of an institution have knowledge of the type of language structure used for a specific purpose in a particular context, because recurrent language patterns, fundamentally social in nature (Hart & Carp, 2014). Despite the fundamental nature of socially shared knowledge, we currently understand very little about the details of its representation in memory. Such patterns have specific structure depending on the genre functions defined by Fairclough (2003) as discourse, or by Bhatia (2014) as language used in a “conventionalized communicative setting in order to give expression to a specific set of communicative goals of a disciplinary or social institution” (Bhatia, 2014: 27) with stable rules brought by the specific use of lexico-grammatical rules and the natural imposed characteristics.

To understand how language changes in institutional discourses we must look into the metafunctions that it can have. We start with the fact that language is used to organize and express notions about the real world, expressing ideologies and beliefs, making sure that communication can reach different target audiences (students, professionals, would-be students). Social, cultural, ideological and political factors determine the types of language use in discourses, also creating the right genre, which Mayr defines as something that “typically contains familiar or ‘given’ information, that is, information which has already appeared somewhere, or is familiar from the context” (Mayr, 2008: 20).

### **3. Functional Approaches to Genre Perspectives**

A genre-based perspective can analyze both formal and functional properties of the spoken and written textual patterns. Standards of textuality, on the other hand, such as cohesion and coherence are at the basis of any great discourse, seen as a compilation of texts, structured under the same pattern. They ensure structural utterances in contexts that will make the meaning clearer in a context that involves different kinds of knowledge which provide frameworks about stereotypical events. The text can be defined as a sequence of linguistic signs or sets of signs, statements that are placed in a communication situation. Hence, they become products of communication with communicative functions, but also results of linguistic activities of individuals involved in social interactions that also bring their ability to assess the experiences and their own knowledge.

Genres are globally recognized communicative events that serve a set of mutually understood communicative purposes for members of the community in which they regularly appear. Genres are highly structured and conventionalized, in the way that the resources they use are limited in discourses with formal features. High members of communities will better use the knowledge about the genres than those who are mere apprentices, or outside members. They are conventionalized constructs, but in a way that expert members can use to their benefits in exploiting the generic resources of both private and socially recognized resources of certain organizations, seen as institutions.

In this way, we may say that genres can become “reflections of disciplinary and organizational cultures” (Bhatia, 2014: 27), focusing on social actions mingled with that particular institution practices. Additionally, genre refers to the way language is used in a specific context. According to Blackledge (2005), members of a community have prior experience with the type and structure of language because it has been used in that context before.

Marttila (2019) brings in the idea that “the existence of any collectively shared and taken-for-granted discourse depends on the presence of a group” (Martilla, 2019: 25) to certify certain discourses. Unquestionably, we have the idea of “power” that discourses can have in certain situations, in strict connection with the protagonists which can validate and make the discourse reliable and accepted by the community. Hence, the “hegemonic power” Marttila speaks about (Martilla, 2019: 25), since we have all subjects of a discourse dependable on each other and determining one another in validating the social world. The many reflections that discourses can achieve are given by power and by its subjects, and their level of interpretations, their negotiation of power (Taylor, 2012; Hart & Carp, 2014), all connected, as stated before, with knowledge. In their persuasive outcome discourses make use of the protagonists, who are part of the social world and who exercise dominance in contrast to the other internal elements of a discourse. We can then speak of “functionalization” when we consider social protagonists in terms of an activity, something they do, such as an occupation or role (van Leeuwen, 2008). In the end we come to the conclusion that the power that some social protagonists and groups have over the others determine the power of the entire discourse.

We must take into consideration the fact that everything begins with the power of the mind, with beliefs and responses. However, to be able to control others, social protagonists must satisfy personal and social criteria that give them the opportunity to exert social influence, both of which must be in place. For this reason, social conditions of control must be thought of as combinations of group’s members, institutional power, assets, and interpersonal resources (and anything else that associates members with an institution). This social dominance is characterized by daily social dominant interactions reproduced in discourses.

Public institutional discourses are manipulative by definition as they are all intended to convince the audience of something. This is how things go in universities, which are public and set on delivering some specific information to a targeted audience, trying to impact as many people as possible. And, since access and control are both dependent on and constitutive of a group’s power (institution, occupation, etc.), public discourse is nonetheless a group’s power. The fact is that only dominant groups can gain power and get the manipulative power. Consequently, individuals that belong to a group and share opinions are different and some can be more representative than the others. Obviously, to have an unanimous consent, the dominant individuals must gain their power over the others, and this is done, even at the micro level, between individuals, through persuasion, offering data, education, instruction, and other social practices with the aim of influencing the recipients’ awareness, beliefs, and (indirectly) behavior (Van Dijk, 2008) all having the ability to bring change and repurpose the existing discourses, although the possibilities for change are constrained by power relations, which, among other things, determine which actors have access to which discourses (Jorgenson & Phillips, 2002). It has become more widely accepted that discourse is deeply ingrained

in society. As a result, all forms of power are closely linked in society. In general, lexical style indicates important aspects of the context, such as the formality of the event, social power, position and status of speakers or recipients, participant relationships, speaker opinions and ideologies, and so on, also characterizing genres. In other words, discursive practices include information about the selection of appropriate genres for achieving goals in specific; as a fact, awareness of genre appropriacy enables one to select appropriate genres for specific activities as well as appropriate modes of communication for a particular type of action, in reference to language functions and a selection of pertinent and justified general knowledge and information necessary to create the genre in question for both the producer and the receiver.

Time influences attitudes and actions with long-term benefits but short-term goals. The perspective that the institutional discourse must entail brings forth the idea of time and space. We would argue that, in fact, time and space are interconnected. There is the time of discourse production and the time of discourse receiving which, in institutionalized setting, can span over years. Needless to say that timing is determined by socio historical setting (space). Genres are predetermined by these two elements and the producer, as a protagonist must always take account of them. Attitudes predetermine, while actions prioritize long term knowledge (re) ordering, under strict regulations of both genres arrangements and meaning deliverance

#### 4. Conclusion

Communication is an intrinsic part of our lives, whether it is written or spoken. The interactions must follow a communicative pattern that turn small units, words and phrases into bigger ones forming discourses -texts upon texts framed by context, time and space. As such, communicative actions are reflections of social actions in the real world having a definite aim, that of delivering a message. The type of message delivered and assumed to be received forms genres. These make use of different and varied settings, different and varied language functions, background knowledge and beliefs that are predominant to a group/organization, also bearing spatial and temporal embodiments, which bring changes that would always make a producer's work adaptable and adjustable to the short- and long-term genre purposes. Therefore, genres are socially intertwined with the many different meanings that words can take in a variety of social and cultural contexts. As a result, both protagonists can gain a certain power that reflects and is reflected in the type of genre choice. Genre power is obviously determined by the protagonists' power. A good institutional discourse will always be powerful through its supporting elements (knowledge, culture, protagonists) and socio-historical frame (time and context-space).

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