

A text and its commentaries: Toward a reception history of “Genre in three traditions” (Hyon, 1996)¹

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Abstract

Reception histories are retrospectives; they look back at publications and ask who has cited them, how often, when, where and why. This paper takes an influential 1996 paper on genre analysis and examines how it has played out intertextually over the 15 years or so since its publication. The main sources used have been Google Scholar and the Web of Science. The quantitative results show that it has been primarily, but not exclusively, cited in ESP publications. The more qualitative aspect of this investigation reveals that its value for most later commentators lies in its review-article potential to act as an interpretive frame for subsequent work. The paper ends with a discussion of whether today we should accept just “three traditions” for genre analysis and its pedagogical applications or look further afield.

Keywords: genre, English for Specific Purposes, systemic functional linguistics, rhetorical genre studies, reception histories.

Resumen

Un texto y sus comentarios: sobre la recepción de “Genre in three traditions” (Hyon, 1996)

Las trayectorias de recepción de textos son retrospectivas; estudian publicaciones anteriores y se interesan por conocer quién las ha citado, con qué frecuencia, cuándo, dónde y cómo. El presente trabajo recupera un artículo influyente publicado en 1996 sobre análisis de género y examina cómo este ha configurado la intertextualidad en los últimos 15 años aproximadamente que han transcurrido desde su publicación. Las principales fuentes utilizadas han sido Google Scholar y Web of Science. Los resultados cuantitativos demuestran que este trabajo ha

sido citado, de forma predominante aunque no exclusiva, en publicaciones relacionadas con el inglés para fines específicos (IFE). El aspecto más cualitativo de esta investigación pone de manifiesto que su valor para los investigadores más tardíos guarda relación con su potencial como trabajo de revisión al convertirse en un marco que facilita la interpretación de trabajos posteriores. El presente artículo finaliza con una reflexión y unos comentarios acerca de si aún hoy en día debemos aceptar simplemente la existencia de “tres tradiciones” para el análisis de género y sus aplicaciones pedagógicas o ir más allá de esta concepción.

Palabras clave: género, IFE, lingüística sistémico-funcional, estudios sobre género y retórica, recepción de textos.

Introduction

More than a decade ago, Paul, Charney and Kendall (2001) made a case for giving more attention in rhetorical and discursal studies of scholarly texts to what happens to those texts after they have appeared. They argue:

To move beyond the moment, we need to find ways to gauge the effects of normal scientific texts on readers when they are first published, watch acceptance and rejection over time, and associate those effects reliably with rhetorical strategies in the texts (Paul, Charney & Kendall, 2001: 374)

They claim that only in this way can we establish that writing, as well as methodology or findings, may play some part in its text's subsequent reception, whether that be apparent indifference, noisy controversy, or well-cited approval and adaptation. In consequence, we might imagine that a smooth, well-structured introduction would help garner citations, while another on a similar topic that is disjointed and hard-to-follow would be less successful. In fact, literary scholars had already been pointing out that texts may have both unexpected as well as expected uptakes; for example, Merleau-Ponty (1974) observed that the audiences at which writers aim are not pre-established, but are instead elicited by reactions to their written products. And here is Frank Kermode (1985: 36):

Since we have no experience of a venerable text that ensures its own perpetuity, we may reasonably say that the medium in which it survives is commentary. All commentary on such texts varies from one generation to the next because it meets different needs.

Of course, certain well-known sayings, proverbs, lines of poetry, and key religious texts perpetuate themselves in oral telling and retellings, but for academic texts, we all depend on commentary, whether unsolicited or whether mediated by lists of required readings, or by reviews, or by recommendations from colleagues or mentors.

As it happens, in June 2012, Carleton University in Ottawa hosted a major conference entitled “Genre 2012: Rethinking genre 20 years later”, a follow-up to a smaller gathering held in 1992 at the same venue and with a similar theme (Freedman & Medway, 1994). Not very long after the 1992 Carleton conference, Sunny Hyon published an article in *TESOL Quarterly* entitled “Genre in three traditions: Implications for ESL”, that has become quite widely cited, accumulating over 300 hits on Google Scholar and over 50 citations in the Web of Science.² At the 2012 event, many of the leading figures in the development of studies of non-literary genres were present, including Martin for Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Bhatia, Hyland and Johns for English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and Bazerman, Devitt and Miller for New Rhetoric Studies. So the purpose of this essay is to try and trace who has been citing the 1996 paper, and when and where, and then perhaps to attempt an answer to the question of why.

The 1996 paper and some facts about its origination

The published abstract will serve as an aide-memoire and summary of the paper (my emphases added):

Within the last two decades, a number of researchers have been interested in genre as a tool for developing L1 and L2 writing instruction. Both genre and genre-based pedagogy, however, have been conceived of in distinct ways by researchers in different scholarly traditions and in different parts of the world, *making the genre literature a complicated body of literature to understand. The purpose of this article is to provide a map of current genre theories and teaching applications in three research areas* where genre scholarship has taken significantly different paths: a) English for Specific Purposes (ESP), North American New Rhetoric Studies, and c) Australian systemic functional linguistics. *The article compares definitions and analyses of genres within these three traditions and examines their contexts, goals and instructional frameworks for genre-based pedagogy. The investigation reveals that ESP and Australian genre research provides ESL instructors with insights into the linguistic features of written texts as well as useful guidelines for presenting these features in classrooms.*

New Rhetoric scholarship, on the other hand, offers language teachers fuller perspectives on the institutional contexts around academic and professional genres and the functions genres serve within those settings. (Hyon, 1996: 693)

This then was the paper, which was loosely based on the first part of Sunny Hyon's PhD dissertation, for which I was the advisor, the second half being an EAP classroom experiment testing out a genre-based approach to academic reading. Some time in the early 1990s, we managed to get funding (the details now escape me) for Sunny to spend several months at the University of Sydney so that she could familiarize herself with the Australian approach to genre and genre-based pedagogy. Her original submission to *TESOL Quarterly* then was essentially a comparison between the ESP and SFL approaches, but one of the anonymous reviewers recommended that Sunny do not go with a geographical binary, but rather with a three-part disciplinary framework, now to include New Rhetoric (or Rhetorical Genre Studies as it is now more commonly known).³ I also asked Sunny by email for her reasons for submitting to *TESOL Quarterly*; she replied saying that she had three: *TESOL Quarterly* would have the widest audience; *TESOL Quarterly* had published little on genre approaches to ESL at that time; and “for me as a brand-new scholar, having an article published in *TESOL Quarterly* would be pretty special”.

Possible reasons for the success of the 1996 paper

Before we look at the citational record, it is worth stepping back and speculating as to which features of the paper might have led to its citational popularity. Here are five positive hypotheses for its success:

1. “Kairos or timeliness”. In other words, “Genre in Three Traditions” came at the right moment; five years earlier, readers might have reacted with “what’s this all about?”, five years later the reaction might have been “Well, we know all this”. As Freedman and Medway (1994: 1) said at the time with reference to composition studies, “the word *genre* is on everybody’s lips, from researchers and scholars to curriculum planners and teachers”.
2. “A Review article”. The paper provided a cognitive map of the world of non-literary genre studies and, in many fields, review

articles tend to be highly cited. As Myers (1991: 46) noted a review article “draws the reader into the writer’s view of what has happened, and by ordering the recent past, suggests what can be done next”.

3. “The magic number 3”. It might be expected that the tripartite division would appeal particularly to systemic-functional linguists and applied linguistics because of the Hallidayan penchant for dividing systems into three (that is, field/mode/tenor; ideational/interpersonal/textual; three main types of appraisal, three main verb processes, etc.)
4. “ESL implications”. Since it was published in *TESOL Quarterly*, it is possible that the more practical discussion toward the end of the paper would appeal to ESL teachers, materials writers and teacher educators.
5. “Quotable moments”. The article had some memorable mini-texts or phrases that were frequently picked up later, such as Schryer’s (1993) “Genres are stabilized for now”, or even Swales’ (1996) “occluded genres”.

In addition, the article may have been cited because citing authors found that it did not represent their own understandings of the world of genre studies:

6. So those in ESP might argue, contra Hyon, that ESP approaches have, at least on occasion, questioned the prevailing academic ideologies;
7. Those in SFL might counter that there are advantages in conceiving of genre more broadly than in the other two traditions;
8. Those in Rhetorical Genre Studies might object that it is not true that their approach lacks any substantial instructional pedagogy.
9. And anybody might argue that Hyon’s “map” exaggerates or minimizes differences among the three traditions.

Some quantitative data

Let us first consider how all the datable citations for Hyon (1996) in Google Scholar are distributed over time:

Period	No. of cites in Google Scholar
1996-1999	21
2000-2003	37
2004-2007	56
2008-2011	61

Table 1. Chronology of citations in Google Scholar.

Although, at first sight, the numbers in Table 1 might seem to indicate that the 1996 article has become increasingly popular ever since its appearance, in reality they show only that Google Scholar's database has been continually expanding. At the least, however, the figures do confirm that the 1996 article was not a comet that blazed briefly across the scholarly sky and then fell into benighted obscurity; rather, it is probably cited today as much as it ever was.

The next question to ask is where it was cited, more particularly which journals carry the most citations. And here we need to remember that in our field Google Scholar will produce mostly book or dissertation citations, and Web of Science mostly journal citations.

Journals	No. of cites in Google Scholar	Journals	No. of cites in Web of Science
English for Specific Purposes Journal	12	Journal of Second Language Writing	12
Journal of Second Language Writing	11	English for Specific Purposes Journal	11
TESOL Quarterly	4	TESOL Quarterly	4
Linguistics and Education	3	Applied Linguistics	2
TESL-EJ	3	Journal of Pragmatics	2
System	3	Modern Language Journal	2
Journal of English for Academic Purposes	3	Research in the Teaching of English	2

Table 2. Citing journals (Google Scholar 79/301; Web of Science 45/51).

As can be seen in Table 2, in each case, the top three journals (*English for Specific Purposes*, *Journal of Second Language Writing* and *TESOL Quarterly*) all have an English-as-a-second language orientation, while those further down the lists cover a much wider area of applied language studies.

I then looked at the individual citing authors in the two databases and wherever possible assigned them to one of the three traditions. In some cases, this was relatively easy, such as placing Jim Martin in Systemic Functional Linguistics, Carol Berkenkotter in Rhetorical Genre Studies and Ken Hyland in English for Specific Purposes; in others it was more difficult,

either because I knew little or nothing about the author, or because a particular individual did not seem to “fit” into a particular tradition. Here are the findings:

Traditions	No. of cites in Google Scholar	No. of cites in Web of Science
English for Specific Purposes Journal	52	20
Systemic Functional Linguistics	11	11
Rhetorical Genre Studies	3	2

Table 3. Presumed associates of each “tradition” in Google Scholar and Web of Science.

The Table 3 figures reinforce the previous ones; a preponderance of citations from the ESP “tradition”, but with fairly substantial uptakes from the other two. These trends are further consolidated when we look at the more frequent individual citing authors such as for English for Specific Purposes An Cheng, Pedro Martín-Martín, Ken Hyland and Ann Johns, for Systemic Functional Linguistics Frances Christie and Jim Martin, and Carol Berkenkotter for Rhetorical Genre Studies.

Selected citational details

Hyland (2004) divides citations into four categories: Block quotations, direct quotes, paraphrases and summaries. No block quotations from the 1996 paper were found, and very few direct quotes, the following example being one of a mere handful:

- (1) Although Hyon (1996, p. 695) has pointed out that “... many ESP scholars have paid particular attention to detailing the formal characteristics of genres while focusing less on the specialized functions of texts and their surrounding social contexts”, this sociocultural context has been addressed in more recent ESP genre-based work. (Flowerdew)

This suggests then that the paper is not being cited for its memorable quotes (hypothesis 5). In contrast, most of the citations are parenthetical, often placing Hyon (1996) in a group along with others. The most common of these groupings is shown in the next example:

- (2) When it comes to defining genres there is multiplicity of overlapping theories along with a range of competing terminologies (See Hyon, 1996, Johns, 2002). (Bruce)

Given the frequent pairing of the 1996 paper with Ann Johns' (2002) edited volume, *Genre in the Classroom: Multiple Perspectives*, it is worth looking at this book in more detail. There are nine citations of the 1996 paper in the collection, five of which are parenthetical, three by Johns herself in her introduction, and one each by Hyon (2002) and Samraj (2002) in their chapters. Three of the four remaining are these (my emphases):

- (3) Yet, *as Hyon (1996) and others have noted*, there are considerable differences among theorists and practitioners about how genre should be described and what this means for the classroom. (Johns)
- (4) As far as pedagogical application of the two approaches is concerned, *as Hyon (1996, p. 701) noted*, the focus of the Australian and ESP approach is ... (Flowerdew)
- (5) *In her widely-quoted state-of-the-art article, Hyon (1996) distinguished* three “worlds” of genre scholarship ... (Flowerdew)

The last of these three is particularly interesting because it introduces the evaluative modifier “widely-quoted”; in fact, I found surprisingly few of these, noting in addition only three occurrences of “useful” and one of “influential”. The remaining citation of the 1996 paper in the 2002 volume is quite long, but is worth quoting in full:

- (6) Many of us working to develop genre-based language pedagogy in Australia have been quite surprised to lift our heads from day-to-day challenges of curriculum and syllabus design, materials development and classroom implementation to find that the diverse work we have been involved in for several years across many educational sectors and all states of the Commonwealth is now collectively known as the work of the “Sydney School” (Hyon, 1996). It is quite flattering in one sense to be seen as a force in the field deserving our own label, especially for those of us who live in Sydney, but there is also a danger that the label becomes as reductive of what we do pedagogically as it is of where we live geographically. (Feez)

Apart from the wry and poignant voice of a rare practitioner, this commentary is notable for its criticism of the reductionist “Sydney School” label, a criticism reiterated by Jim Martin at the Ottawa conference, who there argued that the SFL approach was not only a national movement in Australia, but also one with strong adherents internationally. As it happens, Sunny Hyon was not the originator of the term “Sydney School”, even if her 1996 paper has inadvertently been largely responsible for its profusion.

Of the relatively few longer discussions of the 1996, Benesch’s (2001) treatment is largely descriptive, except for:

- (7) That is, the primary goal is to help students fulfill the requirements of academic and professional settings so that they can “succeed” (p. 700). (In Chap. 3, I discuss this goal as an ideological stance; for now, I accept Hyon’s terms.)

Two others are Johns et al. (2006) and Swales (2009), both of whom question a simple tripartite division. Johns can serve as an illustration of this kind of problematization. Here is her opening sentence:

- (8) The term *genre* has been interpreted in a variety of ways by experts from a number of traditions. Hyon in her 1996 *TESOL Quarterly* article, separated genre theorists and practitioners into three camps: ... (Johns et al.)

And this is her opening to the Conclusion of the round table discussion:

- (9) In the introduction to this paper, it was suggested that following Hyon (1996), genre theory and pedagogies might be divided into a few different camps and/or approaches; however, the situation is much more complex than that, as we have seen from the expert comments in this article. (Johns et al.)

On the whole though, as Berkenkotter noted in a 2006 blog, Hyon’s categories “have stuck”, as can be seen from this recent and final citation:

- (10) Hyon (1996) originally distilled, and more recently Tardy (2009) and Flowerdew and Wan (2010) and Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) have discussed current approaches to genre analysis as falling into three broad schools of thought. (Lockwood)

Discussion

In this reception study of the 1996 paper, there have emerged few surprises. As in much of our field, we can see the regular accretion of citations over time – with under-recognized implications for the narrow citational windows used for measuring impact factors by the major databases. Further, most of these citations are parenthetical, with a decent minority integral, and including a small number of direct quotations, but no block quotes. Most citations are short, neutral and summative, with a few overtly positive and a very few demurring, as in the Feez quotation cited above (see example 6). Most are from within ESP, but there are also a good number of others from elsewhere, including such outliers as an article on musical genres from the *American Sociological Review*. In almost all cases, citers use just her family name, there being just four cases where “Hyon” is prefaced by “Sunny” – one in a Chinese paper, one from an article in *Computers and Composition*, and two from me in my 2009 chapter (belated recognition from the dissertation advisor?). All of the above findings are largely what we might expect from a well-cited but non-controversial article in applied language studies.

If, however, we probe into which aspects of the 1996 paper have been picked up in later commentaries, an interesting pattern does emerge. Most citations reference the opening pages of the Hyon article, with very few references to its closing ESL-implication pages, thus suggesting that hypothesis 4) is disconfirmed. Further, most of these citations occur in the opening pages of the citing works (articles, chapters, monographs, theses, etc). In effect, the 1996 paper is quoted for its map-making achievement, and its review of the “three traditions” is typically used by the citing works as a “framing device”. In other words, Hyon’s frame is reperformed again and again as a mechanism for structuring new introductory material, especially when the previous literature is being invoked and incorporated. This, then, is the principal legacy of the 1996 paper. As for the other hypotheses, there may well be a kairotic effect, although it has proved hard to trace and impossible to document. Hypothesis 3), the magic number three, is also unproven and was, in any case, not really meant to be taken seriously. Rather, Hyon (1996) has succeeded essentially because of its value as a review paper, and here it is worth quoting again Myers’ (1991: 46) conclusion that such an article, if well done, “draws the reader into the writer’s view of what has happened, and by ordering the recent past, suggests what can be done next”.

My own conclusion from attending the 2012 “Rethinking Genre”

conference in Ottawa would be that the three traditions essentially survive, although with some attempts to find some middle ground along the three sides of the triangle. That said, in the limited space available, it is worth considering whether the invocation of “three schools” some 16 years after the appearance of the Hyon article does not represent a rather exclusionary conceptualization. There are, in fact, two further possible candidates: The Brazilian approach to genre (Vian, 2012) and the Academic Literacies movement, sometimes known as the “New London School”. The former is known for its attempts to meld ESP-type and SFL-type genre analysis, along with a more critical approach (Critical Discourse Analysis), plus influence from Franco-Swiss Socio-discursive interactionism, as advocated by Jean-Paul Bronckart and colleagues. As Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) have observed, the Brazilian synthesis suggests that rhetorical, linguistic and sociological approaches can be interconnected, with useful results of our understanding of genres and how they can be taught.

The other candidate is the Academic Literacies approach as represented by such people as Roz Ivanič, Theresa Lillis and Brian Street. This movement argues that ESP in particular has been excessively textual, rather than focusing on actual academic practices. Lillis and Scott (2007: 10-11) argue:

One important consequence of pre-identifying the ‘problem’ as textual is that it leads to pedagogy and research that takes text as the object of study, which in turn leads to policy and pedagogical ‘solutions’ which are overwhelmingly textual in nature.

The main other focus of the New London School that differentiates it from ESP and perhaps SFL is that it tends to resist standard academic perceptions such as relative homogeneity of student populations, the relative stability of disciplines, or the power and authority of instructors. Members of the school claim that, as a result, ESP is too “accommodationist”, thus suggesting some alignment with certain figures in the US-based Genre Studies movement.

It is now 20 years since the 1992 Genre conference and also now 20 years since the founding of AELFE. Since the articles in *Ibérica*, the journal of the Association, have increasingly used the concept of genre as a guiding framework for subsequent linguistic and discursal analysis, especially in this century, it is not hard to see that Hyon (1996) remains a useful heuristic for establishing that framework.

And a final thought would be whether a new form of genre-based pedagogy may not in the near future emerge in Spain given the current Spanish strength in studies of academic discourse, as represented by this very journal, the ENEIDA project, and volumes such as Pérez-Llantada's (2012) *Scientific Discourse and the Rhetoric of Globalization*.

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Although **John M. Swales** officially retired from the University of Michigan in 2007, he remains active on a number of EAP-related projects. Recent publications (both with Christine Feak and the University of Michigan Press)

include *Navigating Academia: Writing Supporting Genres* (Michigan ELT, 2011) and *Creating Contexts: Writing Introductions* (Michigan Series in English for Academic and Professional Purposes, 2011).

NOTES

¹ A spoken version of this study was presented at *Genre 2012 – Rethinking Genre 20 Years Later. An International Conference on Genre Studies*, Carleton University, Ottawa (26-29 June 2012).

² These in fact are higher numbers than the two most cited papers in *English for Specific Purposes* published from 1990 to 1999 (Leeder & Swales, 2012).

³ Recently, Sunny Hyon revealed to me that this important – and very useful – anonymous reviewer was none other than Brian Paltridge.

