

Book Review

Carol Berkenkotter, Vijay K. Bhatia, & Maurizio Gotti, Eds. (2012). *Insights into Academic Genres*, Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG.

Reviewed by Sarah Banting

Insights into Academic Genres collects twenty papers originally prepared for a conference on genre variation held in Bergamo, Italy, in 2011. The volume is divided into four sections which discuss, respectively, theoretical questions, formal research genres, non-research genres in which academics address popular audiences, and pedagogic genres. The section divides are blurred somewhat by the editors' inclusion in the third section of two papers analyzing student writing in master's theses; these papers would seem to fit better in the section focused on formal research genres, which includes a paper on doctoral theses, or in that on pedagogic genres. However, in all other respects, I appreciated how neatly the papers in this volume are sequenced to highlight resonances between them. And I value the inclusion here of research on pedagogic genres and, especially, on genres bridging the academic and the popular. Dividing the papers into these four sections emphasizes the inclusion of such work.

In their introductory essay, the editors point to the "privileged status" now enjoyed by genre analysis as an approach to language for specific purposes (p. 9). Happily, this status affords researchers room to grapple with phenomena that pose real challenges to genre theory. Such phenomena include, as these papers attest, genres' variability and hybridity, and their complicated location both in the individual minds of users (Berkenkotter, p. 33) and in the patterns of interaction between people—patterns of interaction playing out in everyday social practices and discursive cultures that are only ever partially realized in the texts that make up analysts' primary data (Bhatia).

The theoretical papers that open the volume address these challenging complexities. The empirical papers that follow tend to address them indirectly, most frequently by pointing to the variability of a genre and then determining which rhetorical moves constitute its integral core. One paper, by exception, illuminates the exemplary hybridity and variability of the genre of the university lecture, although its primary focus is on how a particular instructional technology might support even greater hybridization (Anesa & Iovino). Other papers identify and annotate for genre studies hitherto

uninvestigated genres: the academic theatre review (Stermieri) and the law student's case brief (Giordano). Genre analysis having now securely established itself, identifying a genre seems to me, in itself, rather preliminary work. I welcome the appearance here of certain papers that pursue to good effect another now established move in genre studies, that of investigating in detail the patterns of language used in a particular genre. When these papers manage to comment meaningfully on what we might learn from such linguistic patterns, speculating about their rhetorical motivations and effects—that is, when they manage to do more than count frequencies and describe patterns—I find they offer rich accounts of the academic and pedagogic genres that shape our lives as researchers and teachers. They constitute a solid contribution to our knowledge of the rhetorical structure and linguistic form of genres central to academic work, including, excitingly, those genres that extend academic findings to audiences outside our immediate community.

The two theoretical papers raise questions about current genre theory's adequacy to understand genre change in digital media such as blogs (Berkenkotter), and demonstrate the importance, for genre analysts, of assessing not just the realization in textual form of a particular genre, but also the other discursive dimensions—social and cultural—that powerfully inform such texts (Bhatia). I found Vijay K. Bhatia's paper the more rewarding of the two, in part because it is rigorously thorough. Bhatia reintroduces his concept of interdiscursivity and uses it to highlight the ways that texts are simply one dimension of genres that also operate in socio-pragmatic space, interdiscursively related to the socio-pragmatics of day-to-day academic practice and the wider culture of academic research. This framework, which he hopes will help move us to practice "critical genre analysis" (p. 63), allows him to show how analysts might meaningfully differentiate the research journal article from the doctoral thesis—two genres which, he shows, appear misleadingly similar in their texts' rhetorical organization. The difference between them becomes clearer, he argues, if we attend to the academic practices to which these genres respond: the thesis writer has objectives particular to his or her need to satisfy the examining committee, by demonstrating "his or her familiarity with and understanding of all the relevant literature, whereas in a journal article, the researcher needs to refer to only those items of research that are relevantly used in the research paper" (Bhatia, p. 57). The applied value of Bhatia's discussion of academic genres is pedagogic: awareness of how different genres differently "appropriate" the interdiscursive resources of academic practice and research culture is valuable to the thesis-writing initiate. But the theoretical value is his framework's illustration of how to account for the social and cultural dimensions of any genre.

Carol Berkenkotter's paper recounts the challenges posed to genre theory's understanding of genre variation and genre dynamism by the difficulty of distinguishing legitimately socio-rhetorical changes in internet genres from changes prompted by evolving technological media. She reviews recent work on internet genres and proposes

that the response to these challenges might be to work with a concept of genre as a “recognition category,” a structure of users’ situated, local genre knowledge (p. 34), rather than a concept of genre that sees it as a socio-rhetorical form somehow external to users’ knowledge stores (p. 33), since the latter concept gets blurred with other external forms, including those of media. Berkenkotter also proposes four criteria for evaluating whether blog posts might legitimately be considered a genre: “affordances”—a feature of the given media that allows users to accomplish their rhetorical goals—uptake (following Austin), dynamism, and stance. She pursues the final criterion by sketching out an analysis of stance in two academic blogs, but I have to confess that I found the discussion incomplete: it was difficult to tell how her analysis was meant to address the question of the status of the academic blog post as a (possible) new genre or recognition category.

The pre-eminent professional research genre, the research article (RA), is the focus of the first four empirical papers in the volume. Davide S. Giannoni’s and William Bromwich’s papers assess some of the rhetorical functions of interpersonal linguistic markers, especially stance markers, in RAs from quite different disciplinary contexts: the social, applied, and natural sciences (Giannoni) and the philosophy of law (Bromwich). Giannoni investigates the presence and rhetorical uses of evaluative speech acts—in particular, of explicit evaluations of relative “goodness.” He finds a higher frequency of explicit value marking in the social sciences than the other sciences. But he notices a tendency prominent across the sciences to remark on an unqualified goodness, rather than a more specific goodness value such as positivity or rightness, and to use such linguistic markers for the persuasive effect of “muster[ing] consensus” (p. 71).

Bromwich also highlights the strategic effects of stance expressions, although he examines the use of a broader set of discourse markers—from explicit moves to personalize other scholars’ arguments, to the intertwining of praise and criticism, to self-deprecation and hedging—in a much more explicitly “personalized” disciplinary discourse. His study attends to the ways philosophers use such moves to manage interpersonal relations when they sharply disagree with others in their field. His findings suggest the importance of proficient management of stance in philosophy RAs, but also interestingly highlight how differentiated performances of stance may be within a field; in particular, he finds it is especially the senior members of the disciplinary discourse community who enjoy the prerogative to personalize their treatments of others’ arguments (p. 134).

Davide Mazzi examines the rhetorical functions of arguments by analogy in science and medical-science RAs, noting, like Giannoni, the persuasive functions of such features. He finds analogies used primarily to accomplish the acknowledged moves of RA argumentation: drawing readers’ attention to patterns in the data, establishing the writers’ interpretations of their data, and situating the articles’ findings in relation to previous research. The analogies he detected are usually unadventurous comparisons of like to like

things (data to data, findings to findings). Interestingly, attention to the rhetorical use of analogy in RA results sections allows us to see how “widely stratified” the actual relationships between current and previous research findings may be (p. 110).

Pilar Mur-Dueñas takes a more macroscopic view of the RA genre than the others, attempting to determine which rhetorical moves are especially integral to the genre. She compares sets of articles published by a single editor and publisher, within a single discipline (applied economics) and arguably to the same audience, but appearing in two journals which differ substantially in the allowed word count of submissions and in the extent and turn-around time of the peer review process. Mur-Dueñas’s argument rests on her decision to consider both sets to be instances of the RA genre; she considers the authors’ purposes to be the same in either case, despite the different situational constraints they are writing for. Assessing which of the long articles’ rhetorical moves remain in the shorter RAs, she determines that outlining research purposes, variables and measures, and data sources and collection methods, and stating findings, are the integral moves of the RA genre. Other moves—such as defining concepts, indicating limitations or strengths of the data, and “prompting further research” (p. 123)—are relatively peripheral, in that they can be left out of short articles.

Like Mur-Dueñas, Francisco Javier Fernández Polo is interested in the integral core of a variable genre—not the RA, in Polo’s case, but the rhetorical structure of speakers’ self-introductions in the preliminary moments of conference presentations. And, like Bromwich’s work on philosophers’ highly personalized stances, Polo’s work attends to the sociability of professional academic activity. Polo describes complex rhetorical work being done in those preliminary moments, belying their frequent redundancy with other dimensions of the presentation. In addition to allowing speakers to manage their stress and generate rapport with the audience, he finds, the self-introductory moments let speakers manage the misfit between the verbal formality of written academic genres and the simpler, more colloquial phrasing suitable to oral presentation.

Sue Starfield, Brian Paltridge, and Louise Ravelli’s paper accounts for challenges to “stabilized for now” notions of “doctorateness” posed by the unwillingness of practice-based doctoral candidates in the visual and performing arts to produce the written component of their dissertations. Starfield et al.’s discussion, like Bhatia’s, calls attention to the doctoral genres’ embedding in wider scenes of academic practice; they foreground research culture’s insistence on written genres as recognizable and valuable (p. 172). Their broad-based study combines analysis of written texts, surveys, and interviews with doctoral candidates and supervisors; the breadth of material may have been one reason that their paper felt scattered. They concluded, apparently, that the presence of a written component seems to persist as a decisive feature of doctorateness “for now” (p. 183), despite the resistance and discomfort of participants in the genre.

With its analysis of the rhetorical structure of a less disputed doctoral genre, the introductory chapter of a literature PhD thesis, Masumi Ono's paper offers the first of several cross-cultural studies collected in this volume. Ono investigates genre variation between theses produced at Japanese universities, written in Japanese, and theses produced at British universities, written in English. She rigorously compares this cross-cultural variation to the degree of intra-cultural variation between the theses in each group. Like Mur-Dueñas and Polo, Ono discerns a generic core, again by noting which rhetorical moves appear "obligatory" (p. 201), despite substantial generic variation: Japanese introductory chapters took up a significantly smaller proportion of the overall dissertation, were less varied, took fewer rhetorical steps, and emphasized rather different moves than the British chapters. She offers her descriptive findings as of potential value to thesis writers attempting to understand the culture- and discipline-specific expectations of doctoral genres.

Two more cross-cultural studies of graduate research genres are offered by a pair of papers comparing the master's theses of German and Czech students writing in English (Dontcheva-Navratilova; Povolná). Olga Dontcheva-Navratilova examines students' authorial voice in master's theses in the discipline of English language and linguistics. In particular, she examines the frequency and rhetorical effect of Czech and German students' pronominal self-reference and use of impersonal *it*-constructions (p. 302), finding substantial cross-cultural differences—both between the two sets of student writers, who come from different traditions of academic writing style, and between their authorial voices and those of Anglo-American academics, the international prominence of whose discourse puts some pressure on academics working elsewhere (p. 309). This three-directional cultural comparison offers an interesting context for her findings, and Dontcheva-Navratilova further contextualizes them by reviewing both research on self-reference in academic writing and the advice of academic style manuals, noting varied perspectives on the value of personal versus impersonal forms, writer visibility in the text, and the generic roles available to the academic author. She finds, among other variations, that Czech students diverge from professional academic practice by foregrounding the role of the author in the research process but "backgrounding his/her role [in] in the interpretation of findings" (p. 319), whereas, "despite the preference for low authorial visibility" in German academic models, the German students typically pair author-reference pronouns with the interpretive work of claim-making and stating findings (p. 320).

Renate Povolná's work assesses different features of the same corpus of master's theses as Dontcheva-Navratilova. Povolná is interested in cross-cultural variation in how students use discourse markers such as *because*, *as*, *since*, *so*, *therefore*, and *thus* to express relations of cause and contrast between adjacent or distant propositions and "segments of discourse" (p. 331). Like Dontcheva-Navratilova, she finds that the student

writers are learning the conventions of expression in academic genres, but that their management of such discourse markers shows that they have not yet mastered them: for instance, the students she studies overuse or misuse these discourse markers and gravitate to certain ones while avoiding others.

Four papers in the volume recognizably focus on genres that “review and popularize research insights”—including online news reports on research in biology (Kermas) and medicine (Herrando-Rodrigo)—although both Anna Stermieri’s analysis of academic theatre reviews and María José Luzón’s paper on comments in academic blogs consider genres that largely address fellow academics. I found it interesting that the research presented here, on genres that attempt the complicated tasks of bridging academic and popular rhetorical practices and styles, was apparently somewhat more demanding than research on standard academic genres. These papers discuss their smaller corpora in greater detail and interpretive depth than some of the papers in the previous section, and their quite interesting findings occasionally strain the limits of the research questions being asked—perhaps especially in Susan Kermas’s paper. (To me, this strain indicates the value of research into these complicated genres: these genres valuably stretch our powers of explanation.)

Kermas analyzes lexical differences between the plant names given in biology research article abstracts and those used in online news articles that report on those research articles, looking in particular at when common names are given instead of technical Latin binomials. She finds in the science news reports a versatile practice of adapting their lexicon to a variety of potential lay readerships: technical names or common names appear, or they appear in combination, depending on whether the particular lay audiences apparently addressed might profit from knowing the technical name. While Kermas’s study of Latin versus common names was quite narrowly defined, she discovered an interestingly subtle and complicated lexical performance, which prompted a detailed discussion of the varied corpus of science news reports that was somewhat difficult to follow. It did, however, allow her to comment extensively on the fascinatingly “mixed” rhetorical features of the science news report genre (p. 241). The genre, she insists, is “fundamentally academic” (p. 239) in that it summarizes the reported research projects in a neutral style that “reinforc[es] the scientific feel” (p. 242) of the report and retains interest for the scientific community (p. 240), but it nonetheless generally orients itself to the lay reader.

Isabel Herrando-Rodrigo also considers lexical difference between research articles—in her case those from the medical field—and online popular reports on those articles. Like Kermas, she finds that the popularizing reports are strongly influenced by the research genre they translate. The medical popularizations Herrando-Rodrigo studies strive to mirror the linguistic features and textual organization of research articles in order to suggest their own credibility and reliability, instead of presenting the research

sensationally, as previous discussions have suggested. Interestingly, though, while managing to mirror research articles closely enough that Herrando-Rodrigo considers the two genres to be “fraternal twins” (p. 270), the writers of the popularizations establish their rhetorical distance from researchers using reported speech, and their lexicon replaces medical research articles’ largely passive voice with active voice phrasing.

Stermieri’s analysis of academic theatre reviews—reviews published in academic journals, months after the production was staged—seeks to establish them as a genre and describe their rhetorical move structure as it compares to that of book and art reviews. Like Mur-Dueñas, Polo, and Ono, Stermieri approaches the question of a text’s genre status by looking for moves that consistently occur across varied examples; she compares reviews published in 2001 to those published in 1991. Demonstrating that the academic theatre review is indeed a genre, distinct from other review types, and identifying it as having two obligatory moves, Stermieri also extensively describes the four most prominent moves, discussing how they play out in long excerpts from example reviews. She identifies deixis as a key pragmatic device for rendering the complex event of a theatre performance, and establishes a shift over time in the degree of evaluative involvement expressed in reviewers’ stances.

Luzón’s paper analyzes the interpersonal strategies evident in comments on academic blogs. She concludes that these comments, which are highly marked by interactive features, hybridize motivations and modes of expression adopted from a variety of other academic and online genres. Among these Luzón includes evaluative academic genres, such as reviews; informal genres of academic oral discourse, from “coffee break talk” (p. 290) to discussion sessions after conference papers (p. 294); and other online discussion media, which offer affordances to meet the specific rhetorical needs expressed in academic blog commentary. She finds frequent informal markers of social presence and engagement, and an overall aim at “constructing and sustaining affective and solidarity relations in the community” (p. 295-296); interestingly, she also finds infrequent but explicit indicators of confrontational behaviour. Luzón identifies the mixture of these interpersonal strategies as what distinguishes blog commentary among academic genres.

The remaining five papers in the volume consider pedagogical genres, including ones required of students—written accounts of visual graph data (Sancho-Guinda), law school case briefs (Giordano), and video documentaries of science experiments (Hafner et al.)—and ones performed by instructors—lectures based around interactive whiteboards (Anesa & Iovino) and academic course descriptions (Gesuato). They discuss the genre status of these various written, oral and mediated performances, and pose questions about the pedagogic effects of these genres on the performers and their audiences.

Carmen Sancho-Guinda analyzes her students’ written accounts of visual graphs, arguing that this tricky borderline text type is not a genre—it is too unstaged and

unrecognizable (p. 362)—but that it needs to be carefully taught. Attending in particular to her students’ use of reader-sensitive features such as stance, transition markers, and rhetorical move signposts, she finds that they frequently misalign their discourse with the expected “situational voice” in ways that recall Dontcheva-Navratilova’s and Povolná’s findings. Sancho-Guinda’s students display a “predominance of reader considerateness over the expression of opinion” (p. 361), and falsely signal their interpretive and discourse-organizing work in their “zeal to imitate academic writing” (p. 367). She closes with a fine summary of what could be taught to improve these students’ performance.

Michela Giordano offers an account of the law school case brief as a genre, assessing its rhetorical structure and its preferred manner of expression as prescribed by guidelines about how to prepare one and as realized in fourteen actual briefs prepared by students. The case brief is a genre with a recognizable core of rhetorical moves, she concludes, despite different schools’ expectations and the variation between student performances. I found the case brief’s status as genre a less interesting question than the pedagogic effects Giordano claims it is meant to have for its students: by way of routinely producing this genre, she indicates, students come to “think as lawyers” (p. 380). This strikes me as a fascinating problem for genre analysis: how to analyze a genre in which the exigent action is not the production of the generic text but the habit of mind acquired through repeated attempts at writing it. Giordano’s focus prevents her from tackling this problem directly.

Chrisoph A. Hafner, Lindsay Miller, and Connie Ng Kwai-Fun’s paper reviews their experiment in attempting to teach disciplinary English for Academic Purposes (EAP) by requiring students to produce video documentaries of a science experiment. The video projects were to be prepared for wide popular audiences, and students were later asked to write formal lab reports for a disciplinary audience. Hafner et al. expected that the video assignment might strike a balance between teaching new media competency and teaching EAP (p. 398); their results—based primarily, and somewhat disappointingly, just on the students’ surveyed responses to the assignment—suggest that students felt the video project certainly achieved the former and may have also supported the latter.

Patrizia Anesa and Daniela Iovino shift focus to an instructor’s performance of a particularly multifaceted and diversified pedagogical “genre” (p. 425), the university lecture to a mid-sized class. They introduce their study by reviewing theoretical understandings of the typically hybrid character of genres in order to investigate how a particular technological affordance, an interactive computer-linked whiteboard, may have enabled the instructor to shift even more easily between classroom genres already closely linked to the lecture—presentation, seminar, and workshop—than she might otherwise have been able to. Anesa and Iovino’s description of the instructor’s performance in the classroom primarily highlights *her* flexibility; their examples suggest to me that the interactive whiteboard largely amplified the quality of the presentation-style parts of her

lecture. But they conclude that such technologies “may favour the interplay of genres that are generally considered different” (p. 433).

Sara Gesuato’s analysis of academic course descriptions (ACDs) offers, to my mind, the most interesting set of results in this final section of the book. Gesuato assesses the communicative goals of course descriptions, noting their central purposes of satisfying students’ questions about what to expect from the course and establishing course policies. She also analyzes in detail the descriptions’ semantic representation of “the entities/participants that are central to ACDs, namely courses, teachers, and students” (p. 445), finding that the courses themselves are frequently represented as agents whereas teachers are less often placed in that role. Students are cast in a variety of roles, but rarely are they and their teachers represented as addressees and addressers, respectively, of the course descriptions—despite that those are their actual positions. Indeed, Gesuato finds that the course descriptions “appear to be produced by academic institutions, rather than specific teachers, and to be addressed to the public at large, rather than groups of students, and to be more about the institutions themselves than the people involved in them” (p. 456).

Gesuato’s is one of several papers in *Insights into Academic Genres* that identify what strikes me as fascinating genre phenomena. She arrives, after rigorous analysis, at a description of a genre that is ubiquitous and routine in academic teaching but also—as Gesuato shows—decisively odd: the rhetoric of course descriptions obscures the actual rhetorical situation, and seems to serve the rhetorical interests of an institution rather than those of the immediate participants in the genre. Although Giordano’s discussion was not set up to deal directly with it, her paper, too, indicated a fascinating, and related, conundrum for genre theorists: the problem posed by certain pedagogical genres whose ultimate exigencies are the cumulatively acquired disciplinary habits of mind they cultivate (the ability to “think as lawyers,” in Giordano’s example), not the immediate social actions accomplished by the student writers’ generic texts. Kermas too identifies what is to me a really interesting phenomenon. Her attention to the “mixed features” of the science news report genre suggests that this genre functions at once in two different social situations, addressing simultaneously the different interests of academic and lay readers—or perhaps a social situation in which academic and lay audiences mingle, unusually. Bromwich’s paper gives us a telling glimpse of an apparently egalitarian genre—the philosophical argument—that, in effect, must be written differently by junior scholars than senior ones. The latter are evidently at greater liberty to personalize each other’s arguments. Dontcheva-Navratilova’s paper, to mention a final set of really interesting findings, highlights how thoroughly our traditions of teaching academic writing are embedded in culture and responsive to the international politics of language.

It seems to me that we might profit from the current prestige of genre analysis in a couple of ways. We should take license to do more than just describe hitherto undescribed

genres. We might assess why certain linguistic and rhetorical patterns show up; many of the papers collected here do this valuable work. I think, too, that we might ask ourselves to persevere beyond claims about pedagogy. Certainly, academic genres are more often required of students than carefully taught, as Sancho-Guinda's paper reminds us, and rigorous, de-mystifying description of the linguistic and rhetorical patterns in such genres will always have value for students and instructors. We might, nonetheless, take license to focus more on what seem to me to be the more intrinsically rewarding questions about academic and other genres. These are questions like those raised by the papers I have mentioned again in closing—questions about the complexities and contradictions of motive, text, and social situation; about genres' relationship to institutions, to their users, to multiple different audiences, to power.

Notes on Contributor

Sarah Banting is an assistant professor in the department of English at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta. Her current research investigates the rhetorical strategies, personal stances, and constructions of research work that signify prestige in academic writing in literary studies. She teaches courses focused on critical reading and writing for academic purposes, emphasizing the practice of situation-specific writing styles and rhetorical strategies and paying special attention to the qualities that make student writing successful in academic and disciplinary contexts. Her secondary research interests are in the pragmatics and stylistics of narrative language and theatrical performance, and in Canadian literature. Her work is forthcoming in *English Studies in Canada*, and has appeared in *Canadian Literature*, *Canadian Theatre Research*, and *Pragmatics and Context* (Macaulay & Blitvich, eds).