

(Don't) follow the rules: teaching genre prototypicality and variation

Barbara De Cock (UCLouvain) & Wilbert Spooren (Radboud University)

Approaches to teaching discursive genres often focus on a fairly clear-cut description of discursive genres as texts complying with a set of rules in terms of structure, phraseology and register among others, which are based on prototypical genre conventions (for a typical example, see Van der Leeuw & Meestringa 2014, inspired by the so-called Systemic Functional Linguistic approach to genre-based pedagogies). Such approaches suggest that students who learn and reproduce these elements, are then successful producers of that particular discursive genre. As Stukker et al. (2024) put it: “SFL-informed genre pedagogies have tended to treat genres as “givens”; static configurations of language forms and social functions that ignore the fact that in actual reality genre texts exhibit variation with respect to forms as well as functions” (p. 170).

However, it is also important to take into account the variability within a genre. On the one hand, genres are highly subject to variability, be it in terms of intercultural differences, differences related to their production context (e.g. different work environments) or micro-diachronic evolutions (De Cock & Spooren 2024). Moreover, the rise of digital communication modes has significantly impacted the conventions of many genres. On the other hand, being successful in a genre may rely on (slightly) diverging from genre conventions, rather than on producing a highly prototypical instantiation of a certain genre. This is increasingly relevant against the background of the rise of generative AI, which, since it builds on large language models, tends to produce texts close to the genre prototype. In this context, producing a slightly less prototypical text may stand out and be more successful.

Therefore, we will argue that genre teaching would benefit from including the concepts of prototypicality and variation. In doing so, students will acquire major conventions of genre while being aware of the possibilities and pitfalls of genre variation. We will illustrate this proposal with two case studies, namely newspaper articles and job applications. Both genres are regularly treated in (foreign) language classes and are subject to considerable variation, especially in the context of digital communication, making them relevant genres to illustrate how the interaction between prototypicality and variation can be presented to students.

References

- De Cock, B. & Spooren, W. (2024). Stability and variation in genre. In N. Stukker, J. A. Bateman, D. McNamara, & W. Spooren (Eds.), *Multidisciplinary Views on Discourse Genre. A Research Agenda* (p. 85-107). New York: Routledge.
- Leeuw, B. van der & Meestringa, T. (2014). *Genres in schoolvakken: Taalgerichte didactiek in het voortgezet onderwijs* [Genres in the curriculum: Language based pedagogy in secondary education]. Bussum: Coutinho.
- Stukker, N., Arner, T., Evers-Vermeul, J., Heller, V., Hof, M.J., & Vis, M. (2024). Bridging the gap between genre theory and genre education. In N. Stukker, J. A. Bateman, D. McNamara, & W. Spooren (Eds.), *Multidisciplinary Views on Discourse Genre. A Research Agenda* (pp. 168-198). New York: Routledge.