

GENRE ANALYSIS AS A METHOD FOR IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

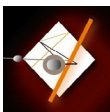
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New media technologies have profoundly changed people's everyday lives. In particular, new media has created many more intercultural exchanges. Children chat in online gaming rooms with peers from different continents. Consumers receive both solicitations and assistance from workers half way around the world. And businesses routinely conduct synchronous meetings with employees in multiple countries.

These varied intercultural exchanges are not informed by aggregate cultural dimensions—such as the high-context/low-context designations of Hall (1976), or cultural dimensions such as power distance, collectivist/individualist, short-term/long-term, as described by Hofstede (2005)—that technical communicators relied on in the past



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(Thatcher, 2001; Hunsinger, 2006; Sun, 2004). If one member of a one-on-one exchange is not typical of his or her culture, the intercultural exchange can be frustrating. For example, if someone from a low-context culture such as the United States anticipates communicating with someone from a high-context culture such as Japan, she might structure her communication in a high-context fashion. However, Americans from the south tend to communicate in high-context ways already. And Japanese business people who have spent time working with Americans often adopt more American communication habits. If a southern American attempted to communicate in higher-context manner than she already employed, the Japanese communicator might be confused or even offended by what he perceived as condescension.

Since more people from cultures around the world participate in these one-to-one intercultural exchanges, more people are likely to deviate from the cultural dimensions typical for their culture, causing difficult intercultural exchanges. In the past, companies relied on experienced professionals to communicate with representatives from foreign companies. These professionals were successful because they exhibited the cultural qualities that the company's culture valued, so the aggregate dimensions of culture identified by Hall, Hofstede, and others were typical for successful professionals likely to represent a large company doing business abroad.

However, new technologies have made it possible and likely for virtually anyone from any culture to communicate with someone from another culture. These communicators may not act as such cultural descriptions might predict, as Sun (2004) discovered in her work in which

young Chinese women did not seek information as Hofstede's model would have predicted. Furthermore, consumers of technical information are more likely to seek information, not from localized documentation, but via these intercultural exchanges via intercultural call centers and message boards. To adequately serve consumers in this new environment, technical communicators must seek new methods to improve these intercultural exchanges (Thatcher, 2001).

One solution for typical professional intercultural exchanges may be genre analysis (Luzon, 2005), particularly as defined by Bhatia (2004) as situated linguistic behavior. Halliday (1978) identified genre as a culturally dependent mode of communication. Miller recognized that "genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality" (1984, p. 165), while Martin wrote that genre embraces "the linguistically realized activity types which comprise so much of our culture" (1985, p. 250).

These new technology-enabled intercultural exchanges create new discourse communities with converging communicative purposes—as explained by Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990)—within emerging contingent cultures that can be studied and exploited. Genre analysis works to inform these communications, not because it accesses and reconciles the cultural differences between participants in an intercultural exchange, but rather because it recognizes that these globalized, intercultural meeting places represent new sites of cultural development for intercultural discourse communities. These new sites of cultural development create new generic expectations for participants.

Because people in a particular rhetorical situation with similar information needs have more in common with each other than people

from the same country in different rhetorical situations, researchers can and should improve these communications by examining the genre closely. For example, Forey and Lockwood (2007) successfully examined a Philipino call center serving Australian customers using such a method.

Through genre analysis, researchers can identify and even shape the expectations for these emerging genres. For example, an analysis of an Indian call center queue serving American customers would reveal that the customer's need to repair his or her computer and to understand where they were in the repair process transcends larger cultural values that inform communication in other rhetorical situations. Additionally, some call center workers effectively manipulate the genre to meet the expectations of customers, while others fail, not because they do not understand the values or communication strategies of their American customers, but rather because they do not understand the genre. These types of analyses are successful, but too few considering that thousands of such intercultural exchanges occur daily with limited success.

The field should identify these common intercultural exchanges so that researchers can use genre analysis to improve them. Ultimately an examination of typical intercultural genres, while certainly more laborious and time consuming than looking up a particular culture on a chart, will improve communication within these new discourse communities in these emerging globalized sites of communication. ■

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