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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GENRE MODEL IN THE INTERNET FORUM

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Abstract

The virtualization of social reality, mediated by Internet technologies, significantly transforms, turns it into a new, previously non-existent reality. Virtual discourse requires special attention, which implies thorough examination of various linguistic features: morphological, syntactical, lexical, textual, and communicative. The possibility of applying the notions of a genre and a generic classification with respect to virtual discourse is in the focus of the present paper. In accordance with one of the linguistic convictions, no piece of speech is produced as genre-independent. People belonging to any socio-cultural community develop characteristically patterned ways of language use. Different non-virtual spheres of human communication or discourses as their linguistic correlates are generically stratified. Systemic-functional theory of language treats genres as social constructs facilitating human interaction. The present paper is concerned with a communicative pragmatic genre model comprising five constituent members. These constituent members may be present in texts of any genre, but their composition and configuration vary. In order to give answers to the question whether the Internet communicative space can be seen as genre-dependent, the Internet forum, one of the Internet communication tools, is being looked into through the prism of a five-member model. The obtained results are being discussed against the background of traditional non-virtual spheres of language use.

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1. Introduction

The Internet is a universal communicative space in which the mechanisms of social virtualization are launched (Buhl, 1997; Ivanov, 2002; Kroker, 1994; Paetau, 1997). The virtualization of social reality, mediated by Internet technologies, significantly transforms it and, ultimately, turns it into a new previously non-existent reality (Herring, 2009). Virtual discourse, which allows understanding the communicative interaction of the World Wide Web users, requires close attention in terms of linguistics. Various lingual features are being now thoroughly examined: morphological, syntactic, lexical, textual, communicative etc. (Goroshko, 2007). Textual and communicative features of writing are inseparable from the notion of the genre (Stein, 2006).

In linguistics, the study of the genre as such was initiated in the middle of the XX century under the influence of functional linguistics, sociolinguistics and anthropology. The article "The Problem of Speech Genres" published in 1953 became a theoretical background to the genre study. Russian philosopher and literary critic Bakhtin (1996) wrote it. He stated the following: "Even in free and relaxed conversation we cast our speech according to certain genre forms, sometimes stamped and templated, sometimes more flexible and creative. These genres are given to us in the same way as we are given our native language" (p. 181). Thus, Bakhtin (1996) characterizes the genre as a relatively stable type of statement worked out by language users in a certain sphere of communication. "Of course, every statement is individual, but each sphere of language use produces its own relatively stable types of statements, which we call the speech genre" (p. 159).

2. Problem Statement

Genres are social constructs according to the conception of the Australian genre school, based on the systemic-functional theory of language by Halliday (1985), which postulates that language is a resource that people turn to for the construction and negotiation of meaning. People belonging to any socio-cultural community develop characteristically patterned ways of using language, designed to carry out various functions that they have as members of society (Swales, 1990). These special patterns are social constructs brought to life by the constant and ongoing need of people to organize, control and hence make sense of their world (McCarthy & Carter, 1995, p. 29).

Many researchers also emphasize that genres, whatever sphere of their existence is, are largely the result of a social agreement. Their identification is based not on precise definitions or analysis of formal features, but on social convention: "certain films are "westerns" simply because people agreed (without resorting to their formal analysis) that these are westerns. If this view is not taken as a starting point, then the very concept of the genre is undermined" (Montgomery et al., 2000, p. 202). At the same time, "genres are continually being redefined as social, working categories by actual practice" (Montgomery et al., 2000, p. 203). The problem the paper seeks to solve is whether the Internet communicative space can be looked upon as the sphere, which lends itself to genre division.

3. Research Questions

Some scholars argue that it is important to differentiate between the typologies of texts and genres of texts. Typologies of texts based on a fairly rough model can be characterized as theoretical, speculative constructs, and, therefore, artificial in nature, with all their considerable scientific and didactic value. At the same time, genres are text types of a special kind, since they present classifications of texts, formed naturally as a result of a long collective experience of the speech community. "Science should not be denied the right to construct different, even "artificial" taxonomies of texts on different grounds ... They have their cognitive and practical advantages" (Tyryguina, 2010, p. 54). Genres, underlying dynamic patterns of human experience, are rather natural than speculative or theoretical constructs. "It is a generic systematization that has the greatest value as a "natural" organization of texts" (Gaida, 1999, p. 107). In this work, the idea of generic systematization is being extrapolated from traditional non-virtual spheres of communication to virtual ones. A number of questions arise in this respect.

1. Are the genres in the Internet communicative space created by the Internet community in a gradual and natural way or are they pre-set by the digital programs?

2. Do the principles of genre division relevant for a traditional communication hold true for a virtual one?

3. Do genres in the Internet communicative space develop an artificial or natural taxonomy?

4. Can the genres of virtual communication be treated as social constructs, the result of a social convention?

4. Purpose of the Study

One of the layers that determine the deep structure of the genre is linked with its pragmatic factors. In this sense, the genre as a whole should be approached as a means of implementing a certain type of the strategic communicative purpose, with which other communicative-pragmatic variables, such as the subject, addresser, addressee, addresser-addressee relations, agree. The result of their composition and configuration, specific to different texts (groups of texts), is bound to making the genre model. The implementation of these five pragmatic factors varies from a genre to a genre. Hence the aim set in the present paper is as follows: 1) to consider the specifics of the Internet communicative space; 2) to disclose the notion of the "genre"; 3) to single out genre-forming pragmatic factors; 4) to apply them to the Internet forum; 5) to find out whether these factors remain valid for the virtual communicative space as well.

5. Research Methods

In accordance with the purpose of the study, the following research methods were applied: discourse analysis, communicative-pragmatic analysis and contextual analysis. Additionally the author utilized a general research hypothetical-deductive method, which consists in presenting statements as hypotheses and in subsequent empirical testing of these hypotheses.

6.   Findings

The Internet forum is an online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages. It is an asynchronous communication tool that has no analogue in other areas due to its fixed form of speech. The examination of a rather vast amount of material permitted to single out constituents of a five-member genre model in the following general manner.

The first member of the genre model is its purpose. The communicative purpose of the Internet forum consists in:

1) exchanging not only verbal messages but also audio and video files, graphic images and other attached files;

2) establishing contacts bounded to professional activities, interests, religious beliefs;

3) improving the personal rating (users' self-realization in the network community through their own knowledge and actions;

4) entertaining ("communication for the sake of communication").

Various topics to discuss serve as the subject / or referent situation of the Internet forum. It is the second member. Users can make comments on the suggested topic, put questions to it, receive answers as well as answer themselves the questions of other forum's users and give pieces of advice. One of the distinctive features of the forum polylogue is polythematics of communication. Polythematic nature extends both to the entire forum as a set of conversations and discussions, and to each separate conversation. In the web forum, each interaction between participants is distinguished by a specific topic. It is worth noting that in general, each forum is monothematic: the forum is set up as a means for communication on a certain topic: children, cars, music performers, games, sports, cooking, etc. Still every polylogue on such a forum is polythematic. The main theme of the polylogue or macro theme is implemented through subtopics, that is, the remarks of the forum participants. The participant's remarks, in its turn, consist of microtopics as the discourse is unfolding. As a rule, a forum polylogue consists of one macrotopic and many microtopics. For instance, a conversation at the sports forum begins with the impressions of the topic starter about the trip to the rink and ends with extensive information of the thirty-eighth participant of the conference about the project "Stars on Ice" (retrieved from www.forumsport.ru, entitled "Who can skate?"). To illustrate the point further, we may turn to the topic «You know you're a Doctor Who is a nerd when...» starts with direct answers to the «...when you always count the shadows», «…when you refuse to have a clock in your room», «when all of your friends call you The Doctor». The topic ends with a discussion of the avatars of the forum participants «WOOOOOOOOO I love your avi [stands for avatar], the tenth doctor is my fave!» and comments on other science fiction series «Was it wise to watch Red Dwarf so young? It's hardly family-friendly» (Gaiaonline Forum, 2013, par. 1).

Thus, the forum has a polylogue form of interaction between the participants. At the same time, the forum communication is not restricted thematically. The researcher can observe the variety of semantic positions in discussion of every topic. A large number of forum's participants serve as a prerequisite for it. Several semantic attitudes are usually shaped and further developed throughout the polylogue. Common examples of the existence of different semantic positions on the forum are polylogues on "eternal" topics,

when each member of the forum gives his/her piece of advice to the initiator of the topic on how to act best or how to solve an urgent problem.

Cathy: «You and he need a therapist or coach to help you work through rebuilding trust and restoring the marriage. It can be done, it's a lot of work but it sounds like you feel your family is worth the work».

Pennie S.: «He hasn't given you a lot of reason to take him back IMO. He needs to be really understanding of you and your anger right now. Good luck».

Zan: «If they screw around once it won't stop. Go with your gut instincts and get out now before any more damage is done» (retrieved from http://forum-divorcedmoms.azurewebsites.net; Topic «My husband had an affair and now wants to come back»).

The above messages are among the first in the discussed topic and reflect three main semantic positions: 1) forgive the unfaithful husband; 2) it is possible to forgive, but on condition that he really realizes his mistake; 3) not to forgive. Thus, within the framework of a certain topic, several semantic positions are generally formed, then developed, supplemented and replenished throughout the polylogue.

The third member of the genre model is an addresser. The addresser of the forum is one who starts a topic in order to obtain information he/she needs. He addresses other forum users, sharing his/her interests in certain areas. A communicative convention, existing on the forum, establishes the order of communication and confirms the communicative roles of participants. An interesting feature peculiar to communication on the forum is the notion of "statusness". The communicative status implies the totality of stable communicative parameters of the subject; "the position of the communication subjects relative to one another" (Abrosimova, 2001, par. 45). The system of statuses exists in all world forums, but their function is different, and the assignment occurs in different ways. Thus, for instance, the forum «TravBuddy» has a diverse system of statuses: globetrotter, sightseer, explorer, tourist, wanderer, nomad, couch potato (Travbuddy, 2021). Moreover, thanks to their activity on the forum, the forum's users can receive various awards: community leader, photographer, writer, most helpful hotel reviewer, ambassador, etc. The fourth member is an addressee. The addressee of the Internet forum is one who has sufficient information on the raised issue or one who is ready to join a competent conversation with the forum members and respond to the posed questions. It is noteworthy to mention about two types of addressing: axial and retial. In the forum polylogue, one can find both axial and retial addressing. Under the axial (from lat. "axis') addressing we understand addressing, aimed at one participant, and the retial (from lat. "rete" – net, grid) addressing implies addressing, aimed at several participants (Yakovleva, 2007). The forum is most often characterized by retial, collective addressing, there is no personalization. The appeal takes place to all participants at the same time. Other types of addressing on forums are used less often. Most often, you can find retial addressing, for example, the first post in the "travel" thread on the forum looks like this:

Aussie say: «what's it like to be an Australian traveling overseas? I'm going to japan but I would like to know about other places too.

How much of us are there?

Are we liked or hated?

Seen as exotic or super common/pest?

And just any kind of info

Cheers» (4chan, 2003, par.5)

Axial direct addressing occurs only in consultative forums because the appeal occurs to a specific user, and the rest, as a rule, do not participate in the dialogue.

Addresser-addressee relations belong to the fifth member of the genre model. The addresser-addressee relations of the forum are concerned with the speech register, i.e. choice of words, grammatical patterns required by the communicative task of the given genre. Here the researcher may observe how language means shift through a "distance-contact" scale: from the formal pole to the informal pole, from impersonal to personal lingual forms. Besides, it is necessary to say about peculiar types of speech interaction characterizing a web forum polylogue. They are "alternate interaction", "integration interaction" and "pending interaction". Alternate interaction is a type of speech interaction in which users respond to the first message in a topic by addressing the author directly and leaving messages from other participants in the conversation without comments.

Richmatty11: "Looking for first trip to the Americas. Not sure which resort to choose I don't want to spend more than 1300 for hotel flights and lift passes. I would say I was an intermediate boarder. Only been to Bulgaria twice had plenty of powder there. Where would you recommend. I've looked at Banff and lake Louise".

Philw: "They're different places: take your pick. Much of tourist Colorado is pretty flat, so possibly what you're looking for.… Banff is a completely different type of place; there's some good riding there and the snow's nice and dry. At the moment Canada is probably cheaper because of the "peso" (the weakness of the Canadian dollar against the US and also UK currencies)"

Flinnster: "Colorado is fun and worth a visit in your lifetime of boarding 😊 but…I'd head north of the border every time, in my search for pow + steeper terrain" (Gonebording, 2017, par.7)

Integration interaction is a type of speech interaction when the response to the remark of the topic originator is given by the user with reference to the viewpoint of another participant in the conversation:

BenRosenberg: "I have really wavy hair and I would like to find a way to make it straight… Is there a product that I could get that would straighten my hair without any damaging effects? Thanks so much for your input! "

ICA: "It's either hair straighteners or getting used to what you have. Personally, the best advice I've had regarding hair is to pay attention to how your hair naturally is and work with it, not against it. "

Onemanarmy: "Yeah get the hair straighteners involved - as long as you use a decent quality shampoo/conditioner your hair will be fine" (retrieved from http://www.fashionbeans.com; topic «How Can I get Straight Hair»).

Pending interaction is a type of speech interaction in which there are no replies to the post written by the topic author yet, but the topic has a certain number of views. Consequently, forum members read this post: Nateklein: 'Hi, So I have recently purchased a pair of 1461 Docs in shoe form and they keep slipping off at the back, I am a size 7 (UK) and I was wondering if I would just need thicker socks, wait and see if its just from first wearing them or if I would need a size 6?" (retrieved from http://www.fashionbeans.com; theme "Dr Martens (1461 - Shoes) Sizing?" (Posted on: 06-04-2016 04:48 ED;PM, Replies: 0, Views: 254).

Perhaps soon there will be a competent in the above-mentioned matter user who will respond to the message, but for now the forum participants are only viewing the topic.

7. Conclusion

The pragmatic communicative genre model worked out with respect to traditional non-virtual spheres of human communication remains valid when applied to the Internet communicative space. Although the virtual environment itself imposes some additional technical requirements on communicative acts, they (technical requirements) do not affect essential properties. Five pragmatic constituents providing the genre framework can be traced in the virtual discourse as well. Additional technical requirements nonetheless should not be undervalued since they are responsible for not quite evident differences existing between genres in traditional non-virtual communication and those in the virtual one. The former are the result of gradually accumulated socio-cultural experience and are appropriated by speech community members intuitively whereas the latter (virtual one) develops rather artificial (moderator-mediated) as compared to natural taxonomy. The variety of genres platform developers offered to its users is ample, but they (the users) are expected to follow strict rules. Some of those genres (the term "genre" itself perhaps is not current among IT professionals) may lose relevance with time, while others maintain it. Further studies of newest virtual genres may contribute to better understanding of their dynamic nature.

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