

Theorizing about Genre and Cybergenre¹

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Abstract

The present paper provides an overview of several approaches and definitions of the concept of genre as a means to discuss whether the defining traits of genre (particularly, its social, dynamic, functional and, in many cases, heterogeneous nature) can be applied to approach the genres afforded by the ICTs and the digital media, that is, cybergenres. Particular attention is paid to the multisemiotic and hypertextual quality of digital genres as well as to the new social practices articulated through them.

Key words

Genre, cybergenre, multiliteracy, hypertext, heterogeneity

1. Introduction

The notion of genre has been recurrently addressed in those disciplines, paradigms or approaches looking into the processes involved in human interaction (both with the world around us or with other human beings) and/or the products resulting from it (e.g. texts of diverse sorts). The reasons of this interest in genre lie both in the complexity of the concept itself as well as the diverse needs it covers. For one thing, the term genre (from French *genre* and Latin *genus*) basically means ‘kind’ or ‘sort’ and, accordingly, the notion thus referred to has always helped us cover our categorising needs –whether these concern natural entities or man-made artefacts.

Together with helping us deal with the world, our knowledge of genres is an integral part of our interpersonal abilities to the extent that, without it, knowledge of other sorts (e.g. encyclopaedic and linguistic knowledge) is insufficient for successful interaction (Maingueneau 1998; Tomasello 1999, 2003, 2008; Du Bois 2003). Not only is generic competence important in interpreting and producing texts, but it seems reasonable to claim that we acquire language in a patterned way *via* the various genres we are exposed to since we are born. The importance of genre as a socio-pragmatic tool has led an anthropologist like Silverstein to state that culture is intrinsically linked to genre:

Cultures are historically contingent though, as experienced, relatively perduring values and meanings implicit in the ways people do things and interact one with another. Such doings, as events, have value and meaning only insofar as they are patterned—the textually oriented word is “genred”— so that [...] people in effect negotiate the way that events are plausibly and (un)problematically instances of one or more such patterns. So, culture being manifest only in such sociohistorical facts, anything “cultural” would seem to depend on the contingencies of eventhood that, in complex ways, cumulate as genred norms of “praxis” or “practice”. (Silverstein 2004: 621-622)

This socio-cultural view of genres is also shared by French scholars drawing upon Post-Marxism and Post-modern social theory (e.g. the work of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes *inter alia*). Genres are described as having a dialectical relationship with the social

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context where they take place, to the extent that societies can be characterised by the genres articulating and arising from them (Bronckart 1996; Maingueneau 1998). Thus, genres

constituent des *moyens* socio-historiquement construits pour réaliser les *buts* d'une action langagière; en termes marxistes, ils constituent des *outils*, ou encore des *méga-outils*, qui médiatisent l'activité des humains dans le monde. [...] L'appropriation des genres constitue dès lors un mécanisme fondamental de socialisation, d'insertion pratique dans les activités communicatives humaines. [...] c'est dans ce processus général d'appropriation des genres que se façonne la personne humaine. (Bronckart 1996: 106)

Of course, if generic competence is a powerful socialising tool, it may also be an exclusion instrument: knowing the 'right' genres has always helped certain people be in charge and set the norm(s); most importantly, it has helped define a concept of literacy that may well clash with what most people actually do in social interaction (Fowler *et al* 1979; Kress and Hodge 1979; Kress 1985; Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995; Hodge 1990; Maingueneau 1998). Nevertheless, this somewhat negative view of genres does not mean that they are static artefacts *per se* or that they cannot be challenged. Thus, as Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995: 24) point out, "to be fully effective [...] genres must be flexible and dynamic, capable of modification according to the rhetorical exigencies of the situation". Indeed, the tools and media afforded by the Information and Communication Technologies (henceforth ICTs) have not only exposed this dynamism, but have proved critical in the emergence of new ways of communicative interaction via the electronic medium (e-discourse) and the growing number of genres customised to or resulting from it (i.e., cybergenres). As a result, we are witnessing an unforeseen democratisation of discourse practices and, most importantly, a new concept of multiliteracy that arises from the multilinear, multimodal, and multisemiotic quality of the digital context, and involves new technological competences (e.g. computer expertise and web-based skills).

The present paper deals with the issues introduced above. It begins with an overview of several approaches and definitions of the concept of genre, moves on to a discussion of how the defining traits of genre may have been affected by the ICTs and whether these have given rise to cybergenres, and ends by briefly suggesting some of the implications of the new digital communication practices in language learning.

2. Defining Genre

Although generic competence is basic for discourse interaction, the notion of genre is difficult to define. A safe –albeit simple– definition might be stating that genre is a matter of text-types. The problem arises when we come to consider the basis of classification of those text-types –basis and/or parameters which keep changing from one framework to another and ultimately result in the elusiveness of the concept itself. Thus, while some scholars have defined genres according to their internal or linguistic characteristics, others have put the emphasis on the socio-pragmatic situation enacted and reflected through them. Before addressing these aspects, a brief overview of the evolution and issues dealt with by genre scholars is in order.

2.1. Contextualising genre research

The use of genre as an organising principle in textual practice and theory goes very far back in the Western tradition. Up to the mid-eighteenth century, the concept wore its original

Aristotelian brand, and was used to classify literary texts in agreement with the tripartite genre paradigm underlying the poetry-fiction-drama distinction. Posterior Classical poetics and Rhetoric expanded the Aristotelian paradigm, and started classifying literary texts according to the topics, modes, forms of argumentation, and styles characterising them.

This reductive paradigm began to be questioned in the second half of the eighteenth century alongside the emergence of new ideas overturning other disciplines and scientific paradigms, as illustrated both in literary practice (consider, for instance, the publication of mixed texts such as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*) and theory. Thus, from the nineteenth century onwards genre theorists drew upon the theories of evolution in Biology and incorporated notions such as *interaction* and *environment* in order to explain the existing texts and genres as well as the emergence of hybrid, new ones. However, despite the acknowledgment of texts' evolution and hybridity, genre theory neither shed its taxonomic bias nor looked into texts outside the literary realm: more genres were taken into account, yet genre scholars remained basically interested in classifying them according to some canonical types.

The twentieth century saw a renewed interest in the concept, which had both a quantitative and qualitative impact on subsequent genre research and theory. On the one hand, disciplines such as Linguistics and Semiotics started paying attention to a notion typically ascribed to Literary Theory. As a result, scholars not only considered a larger number of genres, but also examined non-literary texts in an attempt to explain the diverse ways in which human communication is articulated. Some of the approaches to genre, nevertheless, retained the original taxonomic and regulatory bias of the notion.

These classificatory attempts may be briefly summarised as falling into two groups. On the other hand, we find those approaches where texts are classified along internal or linguistic parameters. This is the case of Longacre's (1976, 1983) fourfold typology of texts based on temporal parameters, and Biber's (1989) computationally-based attempts to group texts in eight categories following their linguistic plus functional traits. The second trend is more functionally-oriented, and includes approaches where modes of discourse and texts are classified according to their different purposes, topics, and text organisation –usually maintaining, with diverse degrees of variation, the four 'classical' rhetorical types of narration, description, exposition, and argumentation (Kinneavy 1971; Britton *et al* 1975).

In contrast to the aforementioned trends, the work in Linguistics and Sociology also paved the way for more descriptive and, most importantly, social views of genre. These were largely indebted to the work of the anthropologist Malinowski (1923), particularly to his notion of *context of situation* and its further expansion by Firth (1957), Hymes (1974), Basso (1974), Halliday (1978), and Halliday and Hasan (1985) among others, all of which started from the basic assumption that communication and textual meaning respond to contextual –hence, social– factors. Indeed, the impact of context on texts and the corresponding notion of *register* are critical in any functional approach after the work of MAK Halliday to the extent that sociolinguistic competence is described as relying upon knowledge of a set of registers. However, although register is closely related to genre in the functional-systemic paradigm, distinguishing between these two concepts is often problematic and has led to attempts aiming at making explicit the close links between register and genre (Martin 1985; Couture 1986; Ventola 1987; Eggins 1994; Martin and Rose 2008).² A commonly accepted view is to see genre as encompassing the several constraints which operate at the overall discourse structure, and register as the lower-level realisation of these:

² For a detailed account of approaches to genre and the problems in distinguishing between the concepts of genre and register, see Lee (2001).

Genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them [...] the term genre is used [...] to embrace each of the linguistically realised activities which comprise so much of our culture [...] it represents at an abstract level the verbal strategies used to accomplish social purposes of many kinds. (Martin 1985: 250-251)

This social, pragmatic and purposeful view of genre was also expounded by North-American rhetoricians (Jamieson 1975; Campbell and Jamieson 1978; Miller 1984), all of which favoured a descriptive approach to genres. These are explained taking into account the action accomplished through them rather than their formal characteristics. Thus, a standard definition is that genre is a “rhetorical site, a place where rhetorical activity is directed to a particular audience for a particular purpose” and, accordingly, it is a flexible and dynamic construct “responsive to the rhetorical demands of particular situations” (Huckin 1997: 77).

This purposeful and staged quality of genre will be further reworked by John Swales in one of the most influential books in genre research, namely *Genre Analysis* (1990). Drawing upon the trends and notions briefly summarised above, Swales defines genres as determined by the action(s) they help accomplish (i.e. *communicative purpose*) and the people interacting through them (his notion of *discourse community* being closely related to Bronckart’s (1996) *formation sociolinguistique*), all of which shows up in the genres’ organizational features (i.e. their rhetorical structure).³ Swales’s working definition of genre is that it is

[A] class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience. (Swales 1990: 58)

In sum, genre research from the 1980s onwards has paid attention to how the formal (linguistic and organisational) features of texts realise or reflect the social factors impinging upon them –ranging from those approaches concerned with the textual/discourse practices of disciplinary communities (Dudley-Evans 1987; Swales 1990, 2004; Bhatia 1993; Devitt 1993; Flowerdew 1993; *inter alia*), to research on the way(s) in which language reflects and builds social relations of power and authority (Fowler *et al* 1979; Kress and Hodge 1979; Kress 1985/1989, 1993; Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995; Hodge 1990).

2.2. Defining traits of genre

Genres are cultural and semiotic artefacts which provide a comprehensive model of different language uses: on the one hand, they foreground the socio-pragmatic quality of texts as well as the recurrent and patterned –automatised– character of most communicative interaction; on the other, they help explain some of the processes involved in text production and interpretation –i.e. have a cognitive dimension (Paré and Smart 1994).

³ The view of rhetorical structure as shaped by audience and communicative goals is, nevertheless, not the sole achievement of genre scholars. Indeed, it is also one of the basic postulates of text grammarians. Thus, for instance, the starting assumption in de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 17) is that “structures are always the outcome of intentional operations.”

In their book *Genre knowledge in disciplinary communication*, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1997) define genre according to the following traits:⁴

- *situatedness*: genres not only respond to and reflect contextual or situational factors, but also, and most importantly, our knowledge of genres derives from our actual participation in them (i.e. is a form of *situated cognition*);
- *community ownership*: genres respond to and reflect the conventions, epistemology and ideology of certain discourse communities;
- *duality of structure*: genres articulate social praxis and the structures derived from it, and help perpetuate these in an orderly fashion;
- *form and content*: engaging in a given genre involves knowing (a) the content or topic(s) most suitable to the genre, and (b) the lexical and structural resources that best meet the purpose(s) of the genre and the needs of those participating in it;
- *dynamism*: given their social nature, changes in society prompt changes in the genres articulating it.

A particularly critical trait of genres is *dynamism*. Thus, despite their collective and conventionalised nature, genres are often adjusted ad-hoc according to contextual factors. This is because both the discourse communities and rhetorical purposes articulated by genres are intrinsically dynamic ‘entities’ themselves –i.e., are in constant evolution and adaptation in agreement with social changes (see also Lemke’s 1999 ecosocial approach to genre). The dialectics between stability and dynamism in genres are voiced by Miller (1984), who asks

How does a rhetorical community *operate* rhetorically? It works in part through genre [...] as the operational site of joint, reproducible social action, the nexus between private and public, singular and recurrent, micro and macro. [...] It is the inclusion of sameness and difference, of us and them, of centripetal and centrifugal impulses that makes a community rhetorical. [...] So rather than seeing community as an entity external to rhetoric, I want to see it as internal, as constructed. (Miller 1984: 74)

Genre’s combination of sameness and difference has led some scholars to discuss the conditions texts must meet in order to be regarded as belonging to a given genre. The level of genericity of texts has been addressed in different –albeit related– ways. Thus, whereas Paltridge (1995, 1997) regards genres as models or prototypes of human communication patterns, Martin (1992: 560-571) has drawn attention towards the *agnation of genres* (i.e., the kinship relationship among a number of apparently different genres): In turn, Bhatia (1999) has coined the term *genre colony* to refer to those genres which, although apparently different, share enough traits to be considered as illustrating the same social practice (e.g. reports and reviews of diverse sorts). As it is, genres’ flexible nature is best seen in texts, which in many cases show traits of various genres (Hodge 1990; Bhatia 1994, 1999; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995; Bronckart 1996; Maingueneau 1998). In short, a common assumption in contemporary genre research is that texts –and, by default, genres– are not homogeneous entities but, rather, are the heterogeneous result/product of the diversity of voices, linguistic and iconographic signs, and generic conventions conflating in a textual locus.

One of the factors underlying texts’ dynamism and heterogeneity is *intertextuality*, that is, the relationship(s) between a text and other texts –a notion first discussed in the literary realm. Rather than regarding texts as self-sufficient artefacts, scholars describe texts as the locus where other –past and current– textual practices conflate (Culler 1976; Barthes 1977; Kristeva

⁴ For a state-of-the-art article on approaches to genre, see also Gruber and Muntigl (2005).

1977, 1980; Riffaterre 1980; Genette 1982). This view of texts draws upon previous work by Bakhtin (1981), particularly his discussion of what he calls *dialogism* and *heteroglossia*. Thus, according to Bakhtin (1981: 12) “in this actively polyglot world, completely new relationships are established between language and its object [...] and this is fraught with enormous consequences for all the already completed genres that had been formed during eras of closed and deaf monoglossia.”

Intertextuality has also been addressed by text grammarians and discourse analysts, who have focused on various aspects of the concept in agreement with their disciplinary concerns. Thus, in de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) intertextuality is one of the seven parameters defining texts. The notion is understood as the knowledge structures which are activated by the participants of any communicative interaction, and are reflected –explicitly or implicitly– in the resulting text(s). This knowledge activation may result from (a) spotting the allusion to other texts in a given one and/or (b) becoming aware of the various textual patterns and conventions that may conflate in it. Simply put, intertextuality covers both the explicit relations among texts (often articulated by allusions to or quotations from other texts) as well as the mixture of conventions from different genres in a single text (i.e. *interdiscursivity*).

Likewise, Adam (1992) proposes five basic text types (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, explicative sequence, and dialogue). These are prototypical textual schemas acting as vantage points for all genres and texts, and are illustrated by these in a greater or lesser degree. Texts are seen as intrinsically heterogeneous and fluid artefacts, and this heterogeneity is explained as resulting from the intertextual and, above all, interdiscursive relations held among texts –the latter being particularly interesting typology-wise. In Adam’s words, “un texte est une structure hiérarchique complexe comprenant *n* séquences –elliptiques ou complètes– de même type ou de types différents” (Adam 1992: 34). He also puts forward two patterns of textual heterogeneity, namely (a) *insertion pattern*, that is, those cases where none of the textual conventions and patterns conflating in a text plays a dominant role but, rather, appear in alternation, and (b) *domination pattern*, whereby sequences from different text types appear in a mixed fashion within a text but there is one that dominates over the others.⁵

The –related– notions of intertextuality and prototype are also present in Paltridge’s (1995, 1997) framework, where genres are described as prototypes rather than clear-cut semiotic models. This is nicely put in the following definition of genre by Berkenkotter and Huckin: “rather than taking a holistic, normative approach to genre [...] we feel it makes more sense to take a more articulated approach in which individual texts are seen to contain heterogeneous mixtures of elements, some of which are recognizably more generic than others” (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995: 17). The main concern here is to describe the generic conventions present in texts rather than explaining these as unitary wholes illustrating a single genre. In short, a good number of texts not only refer –implicitly or explicitly– to other texts, but also borrow some of their discursive and linguistic traits to the extent that they are difficult to classify into a single genre. Genre is better seen as a tool that helps analysts describe texts rather than classify them into types.

Another factor that appears to play a role in textual heterogeneity is the medium whereby texts are distributed (Maingueneau 1998; Askehave and Nielsen 2005; Kwasnik and Crowston 2005). Indeed, as happens with the traits of genre discussed so far, the communication media

⁵ The concept of intertextuality plays a central role in the approach known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an approach with a strong sociological and political bias after the work of French scholars such as Bronckart (1996), Courtine (1981), or Pêcheux (1982) and expounded in the work of British analysts like Chilton (1985), Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) and Fowler *et al.* (1979). The latter will keep the distinction between *intertextuality* and *interdiscursivity* in their analytic framework.

not only may determine the ‘shape’ of genres, but have a social quality themselves that should not be underestimated. This has been pointed out by Maingueneau (1998) as follows:

Il faut accorder une place importante au mode de *manifestation matérielle* des discours, à leur *support* aussi bien qu’à leur *transport* [...] Cette dimension de la communication verbale a été longtemps reléguée à second plan. [...] Le médium n’est pas un simple “moyen”, un instrument pour transporter un message stable: une transformation importante du médium modifie *l’ensemble d’un genre de discours*. [...] Le mode de transport et de réception de l’énoncé conditionne la constitution même du texte, façonne le genre de discours. Bien des mutations sociales se manifestent à travers un simple déplacement “médiologique” [...] c’est là bien autre chose qu’un simple changement de lieux et de canal; c’est toute une modification de la société qui est impliquée. Une société [...] ne fait qu’un avec les modes de communication qu’elle rend possibles et qui la rendent possible. (Maingueneau 1998: 57-58)

As it is, the fast evolution and current popularity of ICTs have enabled the emergence of the electronic, online medium which, in turn, has proved critical in changes in current communicative and discursive interaction. Thus, since a good part of our daily transactions is done through computers, some scholars have coined the term of *Computer-Mediated Communication* or CMC (Walther 1996; Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002; Herring 2004; Thurlow, Lengel, and Tomic 2004; McQuail 2005).⁶ Computers and electronic environments not only have broadened the range of human communication (e.g. wider audiences and blurring of space and time boundaries), but have contributed to what Maingueneau (1998: 68) called the “*dématérialisation des supports physiques des énoncés*” in direct allusion to the radical differences between the print medium and the virtual, digital one. As could not be otherwise, changes in the interaction process (discourse) have led to changes in the product as well: traditional, printed texts have been replaced by *hypertexts*, that is, flexible, non-linear, and intrinsically intertextual artefacts made up by internally and externally linked chunks of information of various sorts and from diverse media (e.g. language, images, and sound). In short, the ICTs are determining the ways knowledge is both articulated and transmitted, and have led to a redefinition of literacy, which now involves handling different semiotic codes as well as having some kind of technical expertise. The traditional notion of literacy (characterised by those competences related to written communication) has given way to *multiliteracy* (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Shetzer and Warschauer 2000; Coiro 2003; Hauck and Stickler 2006; Luzón and Ruiz-Madrid, in this issue; Villanueva et al., 2008) because both CMC and hypertext involve new ways of approaching communicative interaction (i.e. they concern new norms and new communicative strategies plus abilities) and, accordingly, texts.

Of course, as happened with the ‘old’ notion of literacy, multiliteracy is a genre-mediated affair: it is by participating in the genres afforded and facilitated by the new media, especially those emerged from the web 2.0 (e.g. online forums, wikis, hot lists and the like), that we are becoming acculturated to CMC and are helping maintain the new state of affairs. Two questions remain in this regard. The first issue concerns the novelty of the genres articulating CMC. The argument pivots on whether the digital genres are something new and, above all, idiosyncratic of the new technology and media or, rather, are the result of adapting conventional genres to a new environment. The second issue is whether the parameters used in genre research so far are still valid to explain the new digital genres or, rather, explaining these asks for a new framework specially suited to their idiosyncrasy. The following section deals with these questions.

⁶ See also the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication at [<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/>]

3. From genres to cybergenres

The impact of the ICTs on human communication is best appreciated in the changes effected in some of our most popular activities: face-to-face conversation has given way to virtual electronic chats, forums and social networks, we no longer have to buy the daily newspaper or magazine to be updated to what happens in the world through the numerous online news sites and newspapers, and we seldom write letters but send e-mails instead. Moreover, if some of those practices still bear some resemblance with their more 'conventional', old-fashioned counterparts, we also participate in new practices specifically designed for the electronic medium such as home pages, hotlists and blogs.

Of course, given the flexible and dynamic quality of genre, the fast adaptation of communicative practices to the digital medium is far from surprising. However, characterising all practices as digital genres or *cybergenres* is not a straightforward matter. In fact, the genres that may be found on the Web show diverse degrees of digitalisation and/or novelty to the extent that whereas some are the same as their print counterparts (e.g. many of the academic papers accessible online), others are slowly coming to terms with the new medium and, accordingly, exhibit a mixture of conventional and new –digital– traits (e.g. electronic dictionaries and encyclopedias), and others are unique to the online medium (e.g. wikis and social networking websites). In other words, cybergenres appear to have followed the same trend as conventional print genres, as pointed out by literary scholar Tzevan Todorov (1990: 15) when asking: “Where do genres come from? Quite simply from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination.”

The impact of the new technologies and the digital medium on genres has been extensively discussed by both communication and genre scholars –their discussion covering both the status of the concept of genre in the new state of affairs as well as the implications on human communication at large. This is nicely put by Kwasnik and Crowston as follows:

As documents have migrated to the Web [...] their identity as genres has also evolved. New document genres have emerged [...] while older ones have blended, changed, and been incorporated into different social endeavors. Print-document genres adapted to the Web, and new electronic genres emerging frequently, appear to be shuffled, disassembled and then put together again, in a seemingly chaotic manner. Many researchers, and indeed the public at large, assume that there are significant and fundamental differences in how these adapted and new genres will now function and be used. As with many technologies, there are fond hopes that these genres will be socially transformative, enabling better communication, as well as more flexibility and expressiveness. Thus some researchers have focused on the transition from one form to another, on new communities of discourse, and on the issues of this transformation. (Kwasnik and Crowston 2005)

The changes undergone by genres go from their adaptation to the new medium to the emergence of genres specially designed for the Web (Orlikowski and Yates 1994, 1998; Shepherd and Watters 1998; Crowston and Williams 2000; Santini 2006). For instance, in Shepherd and Watters (1998) we find a twofold classification of online genres into (a) *extant* genres, which replicate conventional genres and can be further grouped into *replicated* genres or *variant* genres in agreement with their greater or lesser exploitation of the possibilities afforded by the medium (e.g. hypertextual links), and (b) *novel* cybergenres, which are typical of the new medium and also fall into two types, namely, *emergent* genres (genres that have evolved from conventional ones to the extent that they can be considered fairly new) and

spontaneous genres (those which only exist in the new medium). Likewise, Crowston and Williams (1999, 2000) draw attention to the fact that the genres available on the Web may not be that new after all. They account for three sets of genres: (a) *reproduced* genres (which show no changes with regard to the print originals), (b) *adapted* genres (which go beyond their original purpose(s) thanks to the new technologies like, for instance, online newspapers or multi-page documents where we can find a book review linked to an online store), and (c) *new* genres unique to the new medium (e.g. hotlists or weblogs).

A caveat is in order at this point. Thus, both adaptation and emergence should be used with caution when attempting to classify and explain online texts given the fast evolution of ICTs, the users' acculturation to and use of them, and the concomitant changes in online interaction. In other words, as happens in conventional communication, online genres are constantly changing to the extent that adapted forms may give rise to emergent ones in a fairly short time –both 'versions' often coexisting on the Web and, therefore, foregrounding the fuzzy boundaries of genres digital or otherwise (Santini 2007; Villanueva et al., 2008). In this regard, although the various stages of digitalisation shown by online genres have been used to illustrate the dynamism of web-mediated communicative practices and to describe the genres enabling these, the classification of genres into types remains an issue, as suggested by Santini (2007: 71) when claiming that the Web still offers a good amount of "textual patterns without any clear or acknowledged genre convention".

One of the problems in classifying online genres lies in the use of parameters from conventional genre theory to describe digital artefacts –irrespective of their evolutionary stage. This has been pointed out by Askehave and Nielsen (2005), who claim that the idiosyncrasy of the electronic medium needs to be taken into account when approaching online genres. In their view, "although many web genres have printed counterparts [...], the medium adds unique properties to the web genre in terms of production, function, and reception which cannot be ignored in the genre characterisation". Thus, after reviewing some of the most influential approaches to genre, both authors claim that the set of parameters conventionally used for describing conventional –print– genres should be customised when exploring the genres in CMC. Among the features of the electronic medium that should be considered, Askehave and Nielsen (2005) point to the overt intertextuality (through the link system), global reach, immateriality, blurring of author-reader boundaries, and multimediality of online texts/genres. Likewise, Villanueva et al (2008) discuss the need to build a framework suitable for describing the genres in CMC, that is, one that "enable[s] us to describe the dynamism, multiplicity, graduality and interdiscursivity of [digital] genres."

Indeed, the key parameter in defining and describing digital genres seems to be *functionality* (Shepherd and Waters 1998; Crowston and Williams 2000; Kwasnik and Crowston 2004; Villanueva et al 2008). Functionality is intrinsically related to the technological side of digital genres, that is, the things that users can actually do when engaging in the genres of CMC as afforded by hypertext technology. One of the utilities thus enabled is the system of links articulating digital texts, which can connect textual chunks or informational nodes inside a text (internal links) or, most interestingly, link a given text to other texts posted in cyberspace (external links).⁷ As discussed elsewhere (Caballero 2005), the linking system of hypertexts not only helps overcome the space constraints of conventional, print texts, but is also the means whereby authors meet the rhetorical or

⁷ I am using terms like 'informational node' and 'text' in a broad sense to refer to information conveyed in any mode (sound, images etc.) as well as language.

communicative purposes of texts.⁸ Thus, hypertextual links have topical, rhetorical and discursive implications since they can

- help expand the topic(s) of a text by connecting some of its –topical– key words with other texts dealing with similar subjects (e.g. features and report files in online magazines usually include links in key words as a means of expanding the topic(s) dealt with in them);
- provide readers/users with different ‘reading’ options according to their own interests and, in this sense, have a bearing on the organisation of the (hyper)textual artefact (e.g. people accessing papers posted in online journals such as *Kairos* can interact with these in any way they choose by a click of the mouse and, therefore, can re-structure the texts in any way they choose);
- open discourse spaces where writers and readers can interact faster and more actively than in traditional print practices (e.g. some online texts include links through which readers can contact their authors and send them their views or opinions on the topics discussed in the texts, share files, post their opinions, etc.).

Of course, the inclusion of links in online texts does not turn every interaction into a hypertextual one –or a genre into a cybergenre for that matter. On the one hand, many texts and genres on the Web reproduce conventional print practices irrespective of their incorporation of some links (these are generally used to avoid too much scrolling or to expand the texts’ topic). On the other, users are free to approach the texts in a traditional –sequential and unidirectional– fashion as if they were print texts or, rather, they can use them as the point of departure to travel the Web or interact with other users. Put differently, hypertexts allow for reading practices, navigation practices, and interaction practices (or a combination of these) according to the users’ preferences and/or needs (Finnemann 2001; Askehave and Nielsen 2005).

All in all, however, the navigation afforded by the texts’ link architecture not only is one of the most interesting aspects of the new technologies, but is the main characteristic of cybergenres such as webpages or blogs. Thus, hypertextual links afford writers/designers the possibility of constructing rhizome-based texts and provide users/readers with multiple choice points and multiple pathways not only through one single text but also among different ones. Moreover, they turn virtual written interaction into a truly joint enterprise in the sense that the boundaries between writers and readers are no longer clear cut but, rather, are intrinsically fuzzy to the extent that media and literary scholars use the term *wreader* to refer to the writer-reader combination characterising/authorising a large part of CMC (see Landow 1997; Gilbert 2000; Rau 2000; Clark 2001; Allen 2003; inter alia). Both the new multiliteracy involved in using the ICTs and digital media, and the wreading practices afforded by them are the true challenges in the current Cybernetic Age.

4. Concluding remarks

The present paper has started by providing a brief overview of some approaches to the notion genre, starting from the taxonomic views of the concept to current approaches which see genres as multidimensional artefacts defined by both formal –textual– and functional features (i.e. the processes involved in interacting through them). Genres’ functionality has also been discussed as a critical parameter in order to understand and explain some of the new

⁸ A similar view can be found in Askehave and Nielsen (2005), where links are regarded as the functional and structural units of hypertexts.

usage events –i.e. genres– afforded by the ICTs and electronic media. Although the digital or cybernetic proper quality of *all* the genres currently available on the Web remains open for discussion (and has deliberately been left open in this paper as well), the electronic technologies and media have arguably facilitated new social-semiotic practices exhibiting a high hypertextual, multisemiotic and hybrid quality (the latter encompassing the notion of interdiscursivity as well as the blurring of the classical author-reader distinction). In this regard, the discussion in this paper may be taken as the –theoretical– step previous to exploring not only the new competencies and abilities involved in the new multiliteracy and wreading paradigm, but also, and most importantly, the advantages it may offer for constructivist and autonomous pedagogical practices –particularly, those involved language learning (see Luzon and Ruiz-Madrid, this issue).

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