The concept of genre

Genre has been mentioned several times in previous sections of this book and is a useful concept in teaching speaking. The word "genre" means type or kind, and you may be more familiar with its use to describe literature, film, music, or art (e.g., romance genres, thriller genres, folk genres, or landscape genres). However, speakers of any language do not have to be linguists to recognize that certain "types" of talk, or *text types*, recur in speech, or that they emerge in ways that are recognizable and predictable to the listeners. The term "genre" captures the way that different kinds of spoken language events "bundle" the talk towards its goal by moving from stage to stage in ways that are culturally, socially, and institutionally known. McCarthy (1998: 32) refers to genres as "social compacts" or cooperative sets of behaviors, which people use when they engage in unfolding discourses.

Martin (2010: 25) explains that genres have a "distinctive goal-oriented staging structure." Genre descriptions of language use, particularly of service encounters, go back to early work by Mitchell (1957), who investigated the language of buying and selling at markets and shops in Cyrenaica, the eastern part of modern-day Libya (see also Ventola 1987). For example, in certain cultural contexts a typical service encounter genre might go like this:

> To begin, you exchange greetings with a salesperson, who will offer to serve you. You will then state your needs, perhaps helping yourself, or getting the salesperson to satisfy your requirements. When you get what you need, you will be told how much it costs. You then pay your money, say good-bye, and leave. (Martin 2010: 25.)

Martin illustrates these stages visually, using "^" (meaning "followed by") to indicate the sequence:

Greeting^Service Bid^Statement of Need^Need Compliance^Decision to Buy^Payment ^Leave Taking

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Think about it

Identify a short typical speaking situation you are familiar with (e.g., making a doctor's appointment, reserving a taxi, or ordering a meal). Think about the stages involved in completing the whole interaction. Compare your version with a colleague's version to see how much similarity there is.

Although it is possible to recognize genre structures, like the one described by Martin above, in both transactional and interactional exchanges, the language used to achieve spoken genres in English is not fixed, but involves a great deal of variability and dynamism. Choices ARE made by speakers that are influenced by the topic, their relationships with each other, and the context (Duranti 1983). Sequences of talk, or extensive spoken language events, can also demonstrate genre-mixing, where different kinds of genres may occur in the same event.

Spoken genres (see, for example, McCarthy 1998) have been less well described than written genres (see, for example, Swales 1990) because it has not been easy to capture speech until recently, and spoken language has tended to be viewed as formless and difficult to analyze. Indeed, as we have already suggested in this chapter and in Chapter 4, spoken exchanges are typically composed of very interactive turns, involving several speakers, and are highly context-dependent, where speakers refer to immediate actions or events. However, it is also easy to recognize that there are extended genres such as sermons, jokes, stories, anecdotes, wedding speeches, and so on. These kinds of discourses are usually signaled to listeners by openings (or initiations) like *Did I tell you about the time I . . . ? Ladies and gentlemen . . .* , or *I've got a great joke to tell you . . .* , and move onwards through stages that listeners and speakers can usually anticipate until the speakers reach their conclusion. One useful way of identifying these genres for the purposes of spoken language teaching is to distinguish between talk consisting of "chat" and talk consisting of "chunks."

Chat and chunks

The notion of chat and chunks comes from the work of Eggins & Slade (1997), who analyzed genres in casual conversation (see also Thornbury & Slade 2006). Chat segments are " . . . highly interactive sequences of spoken language characterized by a rapid transfer of turns from one speaker to the other" (Eggins & Slade 1997: 227).

In the following chat sequence, two Australian couples are upstairs in the house of one of the couples where the Sydney Harbour Bridge can be seen in the far distance. Ian, whose house it is, has asked Lynne, who is visiting, to explain how to use a search engine on a computer [A = Anna, I = Ian, L = Lynne, R = Rod].

L: Can we build on the top somewhere . . . another little room?
R: No . . .
I: . . . Right.

R: . . . Gee, that's a very good view of the city . . . Could you see . . . could you have seen the fireworks from here, Ian?

I: Yeah.

R: Could you . . . ?

I: Yeah . . . right . . . Internet connection. (Pause.)

I: OK.

R: OK . . . hop in.

L: . . . Uh . . . oh, I've got to earn dinner now, have I?

A: . . . Right . . . so.

I: Have you seen these? . . . I've been using this chair now for about three years . . . Do you know how to use that?

L: Yes, I do . . . I'd love one.

I: You won't fall off it?

L: No, I won't fall off it.

I: Aaaagh.

L: We had one at work, but it disappeared, unfortunately, before I could have it.

I: It's bloody brilliant.

L: . . . It's absolutely great.

A: So . . .

I: I had back problems before I went on this . . .

L: . . . That's why I think they're great.

I: . . . You kneel on it . . .

L: Yeah, I know.

(Authors' data.)

In this sequence, we can see that the conversation is spontaneous and informal, as the speakers know each other well. Speakers exchange turns frequently, there is high competition for turns, and the discourse is managed locally turn by turn. For these reasons, and because the talk is highly context-embedded and very sensitive to the relationships between the speakers, chat sequences are difficult to teach.

Chunk segments, on the other hand, are "those aspects of conversation that have a global or macro-structure where the structure beyond the [turn] is more predictable" (Eggins & Slade 1997: 230). One participant takes the floor for an extended period and becomes the principal speaker, there is a recognizable chunk of interaction interwoven into the overall conversation, the chunk appears to move through predictable stages, and the primary speaker uses his or her turn to tell a story, to joke, to gossip, or to give an opinion. In the example below, Gillian has just arrived late at a friend's

apartment in Australia, where people she knows well are having coffee together. She goes into an explanation (in the form of a recounting of events) of what held her up [G = Gillian, V = Valerie, T = Terry].

G: It's unbelievable, you know, I've got three ATMs at my bank, right . . . I'm down there today; there's one working out of three, so I waited in the queue . . . that was all right, put my card in, keyed in my PIN, the shutters came down and ate my card.

V: Oh no . . .

G: So I had to go inside the bank where the queues are practically to the door, and every other person there is a businessman[1] with you know the thousand cheques.

T: Oh right . . .

G: I know, just trying to stay calm and then, finally, there's just me and the little old lady in front of me, and I thought, well, she won't take long, and then she walks up to the teller and picked up this huge shopping bag full of five-cent pieces.

V: Oh no . . .

G: So I left; I felt I just couldn't wait any longer.

T: You didn't get your card back?

G: I didn't get my card, and I didn't get my money.

V: It's all right, darling. I'll lend you a dollar . . .

G: Oh, great. Just don't make it in five-cent pieces. [Laughter.]

(Adapted from de Silva Joyce, H. & Hilton,
D. 1999: 84; used by permission.)

These kinds of longer stretches of talk, even though they are still interactive in the sense that other speakers also play a role, are more amenable to being analyzed as spoken genres or text types. They are much easier to teach than chat, as they have their own internal structures that show identifiable patterns of language. Recognizing that there are key "storytelling" genres is very valuable for the purposes of planning and teaching casual conversation. Drawing on Slade (1997), the table below identifies key genres typical of spontaneous talk and the main features of their generic structure – that is, the various stages the text goes through as it unfolds so that it can be classified as a particular genre.

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[1] The term "businessman," common in Australian English, has been retained, rather than the more neutral "businessperson," now used in American English.

Table 5.1: *Common storytelling genres in casual spoken interaction*

Genre	Generic structure
Narrative (facing and resolving a problematic experience).	(Abstract)^Orientation^Complication^Evaluation^ Resolution^(Coda) Narratives first identify a time, a situation, and the participants, and introduce a problem into the setting of the story. They indicate the point of the story and then tell how the problem was solved. They may finish with an evaluation or rounding up of the events.
Anecdote (experiencing a remarkable event).	(Abstract)^Orientation^Remarkable Event^Reaction^(Coda) Anecdotes are similar to narratives in that they focus on a crisis, but they have no explicit resolution. The crisis is reacted to in some way (e.g., through expressions of amazement, frustration, embarrassment, or humiliation).
Exemplum (highlighting a moral point).	(Abstract)^(Orientation)^Incident^Interpretation^(Coda) Exemplums are told to give an explicit message on how the world should or should not be, and to reaffirm cultural and societal values. Fables with "a moral to the story" fall into this category.
Recount (experiencing a sequence of events).	(Abstract)^Orientation^Record of Events^(Coda) Recounts retell events that are sequenced in time order, and have some kind of evaluation running through them. The point is to retell events and share the speaker's evaluation with the listeners.

[^ = followed by; ( ) = optional stages]
(Based on Slade 1997.)

Gillian's interaction with her friends, in the example above, can be identified as a spoken recount; she tells them about a sequence of events that happened to her earlier that day. Looking again at this example, we can see how the generic structure follows the elements of recount noted in the table above, that is:

Abstract: Used to signal that a recount is about to begin. It is an optional stage, as not all recounts begin by signaling what is to come.

Orientation: Orients the listener to the places, events, circumstances and people involved *(who, what, why, where, when)*.

Record of Events: Outlines events in sequence with ongoing evaluation of the meaning or significance of the events.

Coda, or Evaluation: Comments on the overall story and brings it back to the present. The coda serves to round off and signal the end of the recount, provides an evaluation of the recount as a whole, and offers an opportunity for other speakers to begin a shift of topic.

Turning again to Gillian's recount of the bank events, the generic (or macro) analysis of this interaction breaks down as follows:

(Abstract)
G: It's unbelievable, you know.

Orientation
     I've got three ATMs at my bank, right . . . I'm down there today; there's one working out of three.

Record of events
     So I waited in the queue . . . that was all right, put my card in, keyed in my PIN, the shutters came down and ate my card.
V: Oh no . . .
G: So I had to go inside the bank where the queues are practically to the door, and every other person there is a businessman with, you know, the thousand cheques.
T: Oh right . . .
G: I know, just trying to stay calm and then, finally, there's just me and the little old lady in front of me, and I thought, well, she won't take long, and then she walks up to the teller and picked up this huge shopping bag full of five-cent pieces.
V: Oh no . . .
G: So I left, I felt I just couldn't wait any longer.
T: You didn't get your card back?

(Coda)
G: I didn't get my card, and I didn't get my money.
V: It's all right, darling. I'll lend you a dollar . . .
G: Oh, great. Just don't make it in five-cent pieces. [Laughter.]

If we take these stages in turn, we can also see that each one is characterized by certain patterns of language and discourse features. So it is possible now to analyze the discourse features at the micro-level, and to look at

Table 5.2: *Lexico-grammatical patterns at the micro-level*

Generic stage	Language features and patterns
(Abstract) Signals the story is about to begin and establishes the point of the story.	Generalized *you* (to show general relevance of story). Attitudinal vocabulary (*unbelievable* – to show point of story).
Orientation Orients listeners to events *(who, what, why, where, when).*	References to specific people involved *(I)*. References to place / time *(at my bank, down there, today)*.
Record of Events Outlines events in sequence with ongoing evaluations.	Use of nouns / pronouns for participants *(businessman, a little old lady, she, I)*. Events sequenced in time *(finally)*. Past tense state-of-being verbs *(was)*. Past tense action verbs *(put, keyed, picked up)*. Past in present and reported speech for dramatic effect *(Every other person there is a businessman; There's just me and the little old lady)*. Listener-engaged feedback *(oh, no)* and non-committal feedback *(oh, right)*.
(Coda) Comments on overall events and brings speakers back to the present.	Evaluation of whole story *(I didn't get my card; I didn't get my money)*. Response expressing speaker's attitude *(Oh, great)*. Return to present *(It's all right, darling; I'll lend you a dollar)*.

patterns of vocabulary and grammar (lexico-grammatical patterns) choices made by the speakers as the text unfolds.

The examples above have focused on interactional (or casual) conversation. Spoken genre analysis has also been applied to transactional talk, as the quote from Martin earlier in this chapter suggests. In the following example, a patient is confirming a doctor's appointment with a receptionist. In this example, the stages of the genre have been inserted to show how the interaction unfolds:

Identification
R: Doctor's rooms, can you hold the line for a minute?
P: Yes.
T: Thanks.
(Pause while patient waits for receptionist.)

R: Hello, Bonita speaking.
P: Hello.
R: Sorry to keep you waiting . . .
P: That's all right. It's Sara Morris here.

Request for information
P: I made an appointment for Dr. Hardy next week, and I just wanted to check the time.
R: Right.
P: I forgot to write it down. You told me to call back to check she was in that day.

Response
R: Right, I see what you mean. We weren't sure . . . er, I've just got to check through . . . er, first October, Margaret, Margaret, er, here she is.
P: Oh, good.
R: Yes, 9:30, Sara.
P: OK, fine, thanks.

Closing
R: Good. See you then, Sara.
P: Thanks.
R: Thanks, bye.
P: Bye. Thanks a lot.

(Author's data.)

Try it

For each of the stages above, identify some of the linguistic patterns. Look for components such as openings, key vocabulary, verb tenses, ellipsis, feedback strategies, and closings.

Having an insight into the generic structure of commonly used spoken genres and the grammatical patterns that characterize them allows teachers to begin to plan activities to strengthen learners' speaking skills. Teachers can sensitize learners to the typical stages of various spoken genres and

help them practice the key vocabulary needed. Teachers can also help learners think about appropriate strategies, such as recognizing when to take turns and using feedback expressions that keep the interaction flowing. This approach provides a useful alternative to simply rehearsing the kind of introspected dialogue frequently found in coursebook material, as it begins to introduce learners to features more typical of natural speech (Burns, Joyce & Gollin 1996).

The contribution of corpus linguistics

Before we leave this chapter, we need to discuss briefly the contribution made to spoken (and written) discourse analysis by advances in corpus linguistics. Over the last 50 years or so, developments in technology have made it much easier for linguists to collect and analyze large amounts of spoken, as well as written, text. A corpus (from the Latin term meaning body) is "a principled collection of texts available for *qualitative* and *quantitative* analysis" (O'Keeffe, McCarthy & Carter 2007: 1). Using computer software tools, analysts have been able to look at such features as word frequency and how language chunks or collocates to express various meanings (concordances). There are many different types of corpora, which have contributed powerfully to revealing how language is actually used in different contexts. Linguists who build corpora take care to look at how well the contexts they are interested in are represented across the texts included. Traditionally, written corpora have been more common, as written texts were easier to collect. Examples of well-known corpora (the term used for the plural of corpus) that have been developed to analyze large amounts of text include the Cambridge English Corpus (CEC), the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE), the Collins Birmingham University International Language Database (COBUILD), and the Brown Corpus and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE).

    A core tool in corpus linguistics, and one that has proved to be very useful for language teaching, is concordancing. Concordancing, now performed by high-speed computer analysis "allows for every occurrence of a particular word or phrase" (O'Keeffe et al. 2007: 4) to be identified rapidly through a computer search. The focus word or phrase is the "node" that is presented as a Key-Word-In-Context (KWIC) display, which is accompanied by several words placed on either side of it. Below is an example of a concordance using the search word *worry*.