

Textual universes and topologies: operationalising functional groupings with special reference to Middle English Local Documents corpus

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Abstract:

This chapter sets out to investigate the possibilities of operationalising genres. This creates more resolution in the genre apparatus with more factors that can be correlated with the text-internal reality of Middle English documents; also, application of various factor sets will help in the triangulation of data. The contribution of the chapter will be mostly theoretical, even though references to the Middle English Local Documents corpus will be made, and also all the examples will be drawn from the corpus.

Genres are primarily defined on the basis of external features or factors, often by their communicative purposes (Biber 1989, Swales 1990); however, in actual language use internal and external features are inseparable in the genre identification, even though we tend to resort to text-internal features when text-external features are not available, or do not provide grounds for definite identification of a genre (Diller 2001).

Genres are formed through textual affinity: the shared features of texts pull them together in our minds like stars in galaxies, hence the metaphor *textual space* or *universe* (Lemke 1999; Mäkinen 2006). A feature set that can be used to define a genre is a topology, i.e. a set of criteria for establishing degrees of nearness or proximity among the members of some category (Lemke 1999); rechoosing the factors of interest can be used to regroup the texts in our minds.

The metaphor of a textual space serves the prototypical nature of genres: some texts are better specimens of a genre than others; nevertheless, also the peripheral texts can be identified as members of the genre, even though they would be closer to other genre cores than the more prototypical texts of the genre.

The operationalised concept of genre contains factors from the communicative situation, socio-cultural context, intertextual, linguistic and discursive practices to the physical manifestation of texts on different media (Marttila 2014, Eggins and Martin 1997). The text-external factors can be used in different combinations to regroup texts into new galaxies, and that will provide the added resolution in the apparatus.

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