

Style and cognitive science: the perspective from genre

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Style is a matter of performance, and concerns the same activity performed in recognizably distinct ways. For language use, whether in literature or elsewhere, style therefore involves two basic aspects:

1. a specific selection of linguistic means for communication from a larger repertoire of linguistic possibilities, as well as
2. a degree of patterning of the specific selection of linguistic means into a determinate variety of the activity—a language variety.

In linguistics, style has moreover been distinguished from other varieties of language use like dialect, sociolect, and register. The latter are macro-varieties whereas style is a micro-variety, which suggests that there is also a question of scale. When modeling style, we therefore have to take into account the following questions:

1. what is the appropriate level of ‘same activity’?
2. how can the specific selection of linguistic means be precisely demarcated from other selections?
3. what is the larger repertoire of linguistic means from which various styles can be drawn?
4. where does the level of style as a micro-level of systematic linguistic variation stop, and where does the macro-level of linguistic variety proper begin?

The answer to these questions, I argue, should be given from the perspective of genre. Genre may be conceptualized in various ways, but from a cognitive-scientific angle, people co-construct instantiations of genres when they engage in linguistic and communicative performance. Genres may hence be studied as cognitive models that language users employ when participating in discourse. Genres in literature may hence be seen as a special case of genres in all discourse.

Generally, language and language varieties in usage can be seen as reflections of the various properties of genres. In particular, they constitute the expression and impression

of aspects of text and context pertaining to genre. Style is the limiting case of such a concrete and recognizable language variety. In my talk, I will elaborate on these points in various theoretical and empirical ways, paying special attention to the difference between literary and nonliterary genres.