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Felt Sensing of Speech Acts in Written Genre Acquisition

Cover Page Footnote

Randall Popken is Director of the Writing Program and Professor of English at Tarleton State University, Stephenville, Texas.

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There are [. . .] various classes of speech, to one of which every speech belongs [. . .]. The student of rhetoric must [. . .] acquire a proper knowledge of these classes and then be able to follow them accordingly with his senses when he sees them in the practical affairs of life.

—Plato's *Phaedrus*

As it has developed over the last two decades, genre theory—drawing from anthropology, classical rhetoric, educational theory, discourse analysis, English as a Second Language, linguistics, and literary theory—has provided theorists and teachers with a way to understand written discourse (e.g., Berkenkotter and Huckin; Swales). Moreover, as is shown by its use in new textbooks such as John Trimbur's *The Call to Write*, genre theory also has applications to the teaching of writing in college. A particularly applicable sub-discipline within genre scholarship has been work in an area known as “genre acquisition” (Freedman, “Show” 248). Essentially, this scholarship sets out to identify principles governing the behavior of developing writers when they produce genres with which they have had little or no familiarity. The potential pedagogical importance of work in genre acquisition is clear: consistent theories about how humans acquire genres should help composition teachers develop a paradigm for genre instruction, including more effective courses and writing tasks.

Much of the scholarship¹ in genre acquisition centers on the role played by social contexts: local rhetorical situations, contexts within discourse communities, and cultural contexts. Borrowing from situated learning theory, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin analyze ways that developing writers get genre knowledge by being immersed in contexts of a genre's typical use—for example, through “participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life” (482). Other similar scholarship investigates what genre knowledge con-

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¹ I limit my scope in this paper to genre acquisition in adult (college level and beyond) writers. However, there is also a growing body of scholarship involving written genre acquisition by children.

sists of and how rhetorical contexts affect the process of acquiring a genre's features (e.g., Freedman and Adam).

Although this socially-oriented scholarship tells us much about what features writers acquire and how their acquisition is related to situationality, its shortcoming is that it only looks at developing writers from the "outside" rather than telling us about the role played *by the writers themselves* in the acquisition process. This is precisely the point made by John Ackerman in his comment that social interpretations of the acquisition process can "obscure other kinds of genre activity that may not be so easily found either in formal, public texts or in ongoing critical debate" (147).

In this paper the "other kind of genre activity" that I center on is the felt sensing that developing writers rely on when they acquire new genres. In one of her early papers on genre acquisition, Aviva Freedman had already taken a step toward investigating this phenomenon. Freedman reports on a study she did of the acquisition of an unfamiliar genre by a group of Canadian undergraduate students taking an introductory law course. These students had no prior law courses, had never written the genre they were being asked to write, nor had they model texts to imitate. Nonetheless, they were able to produce the genre successfully, an accomplishment that amazed Freedman and her research team ("Learning" 112). In explaining how these students' genre knowledge "is derived, [and] on what it is based" (103), Freedman argues that the students came to the course already having written a number of academic genres from which they had inferred a "broad schema for academic discourse" (103). Thus, when they first entered the unfamiliar law genre, the students brought with them a "dimly felt sense" of it (104). Then, this felt sense was "modified" through various aspects of the class, including "lectures, seminars, readings, and class experiences as constrained by the questions posed in the assignments themselves" (106). Moreover, the felt sense was "both given form and reshaped" (100) as it interacted with the students' act of doing the discourse—their composing processes: "there is a shuttling back and forth between this felt sense and the unfolding text, each modifying the other as the text unfolds" (102). In short, although these writers started only with a generalized sense of academic discourse, "some features of the genre are created in the actual process of composing" (106).

By proposing a phenomenological model, Freedman takes a bold and important step toward broadening the theoretical framework for talking about written genre acquisition. Still, as Freedman herself admits, there is much more to be explored regarding the potential role of felt sensing in genre acquisition. Furthermore, as a college writing teacher, I am uncomfortable with the way that Freedman sees felt sensing as the be-all-and-end-all for the acquisition of *every* genre property area, including its "shape, structure, rhetorical stance, [and] thinking strategies" ("Learning" 102). In other words, it seems premature to close off discussions about the ways of knowing that are at work in genre acquisition simply by chalking *everything* up to felt sensing. Instead, we need more extensive theorizing and investigation, which, on the one hand, might lend credibility to Freedman's critics, who argue for conscious processes in genre acquisition (Williams and Columb); on the other hand, it might ultimately support Freedman's claims. Either way, more work on felt sensing in genre acquisition could also

contribute to current conversations about language acquisition in general by ESL scholars and linguists and to the growth of a paradigm for teaching genre.

But, in order to be on solid ground, the conversation about felt sensing and genre acquisition has to be more specific than it has been in Freedman's scholarship. After all, genres consist of a wide variety of "property" areas, ranging from formal (e.g., syntax, cohesion, superstructures) to non-formal (e.g., epistemological assumptions, kinds of specificity) properties. Thus, in order to make any claims at all about the role of felt sensing in genre acquisition, we need to focus on how it might work in some of these property areas. In this paper, I want to open such an exploration by looking at illocutionary speech acts, which are the very essence of genre. In the following pages, I begin by discussing the role played by illocutionary speech acts in genres, then I offer a theory for how felt sensing functions in acquiring this aspect of genre, and finally I discuss the issue of felt sensing and attempts to teach illocutionary speech acts to developing writers.

The Role of Speech Acts in Genres

Many contemporary theorists agree that rhetorical action is the essence of genre; in fact, genres are most frequently defined as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (Miller 159). But rhetorical actions are also the abstract phenomena that speech act theorists following Austin and Searle call "illocutionary speech acts," or simply "speech acts" (Bazerman 88).² The connection between genre and speech act, then, is that they both do the same thing. Each genre performs at least one (and usually more than one) primary speech act—it might *state, describe, assert, warn, remark, comment, order, apologize, criticize, request, demand, welcome, promise, object, censure, illustrate, rhapsodize, predict, clarify*, and so on. This primary speech act is the "large-scale typification of rhetorical action" that Carolyn Miller speaks of (163) and that Charles Bazerman calls a "macro-act." As an example of a primary speech act, Larry Selinker, Mary Todd-Trimble, and Louis Trimble show how *detailing an experiment* is central to the genre of a scientific research article (312).

However, speech acts exist at more than just this primary level in genres. Embedded within primary speech acts are other secondary speech acts; from this perspective, a genre is a speech act with other speech acts embedded in it. Thus, in the scientific research article mentioned above (in which *detailing an experiment* is the global speech act), the following secondary speech acts are likely: *stating purpose; reporting past research; discussing theory; stating the problem, reporting results, reporting conclusions, and justifying experimental procedure* (Selinker, Todd-Trimble, and Trimble 312). Together, these primary and second-

² Refining Austin's work, Searle later posited four categories of this rhetorical action (of speech acts): the *locutionary act* (the action of uttering concrete words, phrases, morphemes, sentences); the *propositional act* (roughly equivalent to the semantic content); the *illocutionary act* (the performance, the actual "doing" of the act); and the *perlocutionary act* (the actual effect being made on the hearers or readers). However, when theorists refer to "speech acts" today, they most commonly are talking about illocutionary acts (Campbell).

any speech acts make up the elemental rhetorical action in a genre—something I will refer to as the genre’s “speech act core.” The actual surface level coding of the speech act core may have hundreds of varieties; however, there tend to be similar ways of coding speech acts within genres, though the range of options depends entirely on how flexible the genre is.

Even though it is abstract, the speech act core is one of a genre’s primary identifying features, and it is a critical feature of a genre for the developing writer. Because each genre has a unique relationship to its situation, each genre also has a unique speech act core. It follows that, when developing writers acquire a new genre, they have to know the genre’s speech act core. In fact, if a developing writer who is attempting to learn a new genre produces a text without the genre’s speech act core, the result will be something else, not at all the original genre.

Acquiring the Speech Act Core through Experiencing and Felt Sensing

Because a genre’s speech act core is so abstract, acquiring it depends heavily on felt sensing. Of course, developing writers may memorize superstructures, scripts, style features, or cohesive devices that often accompany certain speech acts; in a textbook, they might even read about *topoi* for inventing the contents that carry out speech acts. But the speech act itself isn’t something people can memorize or merely read about. As I noted above, it is an abstract action. It is something like the phenomenon of play in a sport; one can learn the many formal characteristics and rules of, say, tennis, but the essence of the sport is the *playing itself* (Freadman). Thus, to know this abstract quality of play in tennis, one has to have done the sport. Similarly, to know a speech act in a genre, one has to *experience* it, usually first as a reader or hearer of the genre. Experiencing, as Eugene Gendlin has theorized, is a dynamic process of being-in-life, the “raw, present, ongoing, functioning (in us)” (*Experiencing* 11). Accompanying experiencing is a “concretely present flow of feeling” (*Experiencing* 11), an “ever present feeling mass” (*Experiencing* 13). Felt sensing, which “functions in every situation, and in a highly orderly way,” is a “body-sense” that humans have about whatever they encounter (Gendlin, “Thinking” 90, 104).

To analyze the felt sensing that writers might utilize when they experience a genre’s speech act core, let me turn to a hypothetical example. Assume, for instance, that a young woman—a recent graduate of a small liberal arts college—receives in the mail from her alma mater a specimen of a genre we might call the “funding solicitation letter.” While this genre may contain several secondary speech acts, without a doubt one of its primary speech acts is *persuading a reader to make a contribution to an academic institution*. If she takes the letter seriously enough to read it carefully, at once the young woman may feel the force of the letter’s particular brand of persuasion. This rhetorical action, whether she accepts the persuasion or not, presses on her, bombarding her emotions with appeals such as these: “Your contributions will benefit the students of the future,” “The gift you give will help us continue to operate into the next decade,” “Your children and your children’s children will benefit from the college’s long term stability,” and “We will be able to add computer terminals for all library patrons.”

The young woman's experiencing of persuasion in this genre may result in some complex, perhaps even at times contradictory, felt sensing. For instance, she may wince, sneer, or even giggle at the persuasion. At the same time, experiencing the speech act may create a Burkean identification with the institution. That is, her experiencing might trigger visions (perhaps even dreamy images) of a peaceful campus, brilliant faculty, and interesting students; through reading the letter (and, through the years, reading others like it), she may thus become "substantially one" (Burke 20) with the letter's rhetorical action and its source. As the young woman internalizes this genre's special kind of persuasion, her felt sensing ultimately becomes "felt meaning," "the meaning-to-us of the concepts" (Gendlin, *Experiencing* 230). When this happens, she has begun to acquire the primary speech act of the genre.

Let me now change the scene and show the same young woman five years later after taking a position as a fund-raiser in the development office at her alma mater, a job that calls upon her to write this solicitation letter genre herself. Now she has to acquire the genre as a *producer* rather than just as a reader of it; thus, at this point she has to re-experience the speech act core as a writer, which is probably more demanding than experiencing it as a reader. As she experiences the solicitation letter as a writer, the young woman has an increased overlapping of many other, adjacent felt sensings, e. g., about the profession, about the specific institution where she is working, about the goals of her work, about the policies and strategies of her direct supervisor. In short, social and cultural considerations now bear especially heavily upon the genre learner's experiencing. Furthermore, this experiencing as a writer might even lead the young woman to an anxious felt sensing about having to perform the primary speech act, of trying to convince someone to give money to the college.

Of course, the young woman's felt sensing as a writer may also overlap with those she formed earlier as a reader of the genre. Gendlin notes that in the process of the intermingling of felt senses "[a]ny experiential meaning can schematicize another experiential meaning, or be schematicized by any other experiential meaning" (*Experiencing* 167). Thus, the identification that the woman experienced as a reader may loom so large that it also provides a framework for her new experiences as a writer. In short, all subsequent experiences she has with this speech act core may be driven by her dreamy images of the campus, faculty, and students.

Furthermore, an all-important dimension of the young woman's genre acquisition both as a reader and a writer is that her felt sensing helps her perceive the relationship between the genre's speech act core and the rhetorical situation in which the genre is used. This relationship, like the speech act core itself, is highly abstract. In fact, Amy Devitt proposes that genre (and, thus, its speech act core) and situation aren't really separate entities at all. Because felt sensing is "supralogical" and can hold "more than a given logic can represent" (Gendlin, *Experiencing* 26), the developing writer can perceive simultaneously "the language and the situation" (Gendlin, "Thinking" 104). In short, the writer knows that situation is the speech act and that speech act *is* the situation.

Felt sensing may also provide this young woman with the ability to utilize speech acts from genres she has written or read in the past. After all, it is well

established that past genres can provide a powerful backdrop for the acquisition of new genres (Lucas; Popken, "Genre Transfer"). But the role of these past genres in the acquisition and production of new ones is two-dimensional—and, thus, potentially contradictory. For instance, on the one hand, the young woman has to be able to distinguish the persuading in the funding solicitation letter from the persuading in other genres she may have written or read: newspaper editorials, scientific papers, automobile advertisements, love letters. While the term "persuasion" describes the primary speech act in all four of these genres, the nuances among different varieties of persuasion are critical. She couldn't, after all, simply take the variety of persuasion used in a scientific paper and use it whole cloth in a solicitation letter.

On the other hand, the young woman can't divorce herself entirely from the persuading in other genres; in fact, there is the possibility that lurking in those prior genres are speech act experiences that could reify, solidify, and reinforce what she is trying to do in the solicitation letters. For example, she may once have read an editorial whose persuasive appeal is soft enough but clear enough to coincide with what she needs to use for the letter of sales appeal. This phenomenon is "transliteration"—when a developing writer acquires a new genre by borrowing, bending, and re-shaping aspects of a previous genre, fitting them into the new genre (Popken, "Uncertainty").

However, it seems likely that the conscious mind can't separate speech acts and, at the same time, transliterate them. But felt sensing probably can. According to Gendlin, through felt sensing humans can perceive contradictory dimensions of their experiences. For instance, felt sensing permits us to perceive both a whole and its parts simultaneously: "when we think a situation, its whole past history functions in how we think it" ("Thinking" 82), but we "need not think the past details each separately. They function implicitly in how we think the situation" ("Thinking" 88). Thus, it also seems feasible that through felt sensing we can sort out the differences between the abstract persuasion and the specific versions of that speech act in different genres. Gendlin's notions about felt sensing also help explain transliteration. That is, as I noted earlier, by their very nature various felt sensings overlap and intertwine; a felt sense can be "applicable to two, otherwise diverse things. Therefore, it can be a relation of likeness between them" (Gendlin, *Experiencing* 159). Felt sensing gives humans the ability to mix and match, taking speech acts from one genre and reshaping them for another, very different genre.

Let me now return briefly to offer an alternative interpretation of the case of the remarkable genre acquisition reported by Freedman in her study of students in a law course. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, Freedman theorizes that these students came to the class with a felt sense about academic discourse in general and that this felt sense, modified in a number of ways, then carried them through to acquiring all the necessary properties of the genre used in the class. However, if we consider the role of speech acts in genre acquisition, Freedman's sweeping generalization about felt sensing being responsible for the *entire* acquisition process may not be true. Instead, what I believe occurred was that, over the entire year in which the course was given, the students in Freedman's study developed a felt sense of the speech act core of the genre they were called upon

to write.³ This felt sense may have developed from what the students experienced in the class through the professor's lectures and class discussions; it also may have come as a result of the students' experiences writing, listening to, or reading hundreds (perhaps thousands) of other genres through the years, genres with adjacent—if not identical—speech acts. Furthermore, although Freedman indicates that all the students weren't necessarily of high ability ("Learning" 97), it seems likely that, taking such a specialized elective course, they were motivated enough to identify with the speech acts involved in the genre they acquired.

Then, guided by a felt sense of—and an identification with—the speech act core, the students might have used more conscious ways of thinking in order to invent some of the formal and informal properties needed to code those speech acts. For instance, they may have called on their memory of previously read texts for phrasing, superstructures, or personae; they may have called upon principles they learned from rhetoric textbooks or handbooks for options to create cohesion; and they may even have consciously applied heuristic devices to invent content. In short, these students' acquisition of the law genre probably combined a conscious knowledge of properties used to code the core speech acts with a felt sense of how to use them in the context of this new genre. After all, felt sensing functions as a kairotic barometer, helping humans to "orient [them]selves in situations and make appropriate responses, all on the basis of the felt meanings of observation" (Gendlin, *Experiencing* 68). Using felt sensing both to know the core speech acts and to know how to situate those speech acts, the students in Freedman's study were well on their way to acquiring the genre.

Pedagogical Considerations

I have argued in this paper, first, that acquiring speech acts is central to being able to "know" a genre and, second, that felt experiencing is the way developing writers acquire that genre's speech acts. If these contentions are true, they carry with them some important considerations for teaching writing, especially for developing a paradigm for teaching genres.

First, it should be obvious that—in spite of their importance in the process of genre acquisition—speech acts can't simply be "taught" in the direct, isolated way they have been for over one hundred years. Nineteenth and early twentieth century American composition teaching often isolated the "modes of discourse" and "patterns of exposition" (the theoretical precursors of speech acts) for teaching. That same approach, in fact, still exists today in college textbooks such as Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper's *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*. In Part One of the latest edition of their book, Axelrod and Cooper isolate the following

³ Of note is the fact that the study was based on four writing assignments that the students wrote over a nine-month period, which means that the first one probably wasn't even produced until two months into the term. We also don't know whether Freedman studied the writings from earlier in the year or later; in other words, it isn't clear whether "acquisition" was most apparent immediately or in the later writings. If, in fact, it was the later writings that Freedman examined, then students would have had ample time to identify with and internalize the key speech acts used for the new genre.

primary speech acts: *remembering events, remembering people, explaining a concept, arguing a position, proposing a solution, justifying an evaluation, speculating about causes, and interpreting stories*. Then, in Part Three, Axelrod and Cooper further isolate what amount to secondary speech acts: *narrating, describing, defining, classifying, comparing and contrasting, and arguing*. Overall, Axelrod and Cooper assume that these speech acts exist in many different genres and that if students “master” these speech acts they will become fluent, able to survive in virtually any rhetorical context where they are used. But, as I have already suggested, speech acts take on the colorings of the particular contexts of each genre they inhabit; therefore, this discursive ecology is violated by such a decontextualized pedagogy (Freedman, Adam, and Smart).

Worse yet, a pedagogy that isolates speech acts doesn’t allow developing writers to capitalize on the power of felt experiencing in the acquisition process. If a formal “unit of instruction” centers on the conceptual side of *explaining a concept*, for instance, students won’t necessarily experience the richness of this speech act as rhetorical action. In other words, isolated speech act pedagogies give students a pre-packaged, homogenized, simplified version of a speech act rather than allowing them to participate in—and, ultimately, to identify with—it. Acquisition seems more likely if students feel the speech act by participating in the flow of discursive action through readings, class discussions, lectures, and other student-to-teacher and student-to-student interactions.

Unfortunately, creating an experiential speech act pedagogy is hard to do, especially considering the limitations inherent in writing courses in American higher education. I can attest to how difficult it is to do this through many of my own (often failed) experiments teaching research writing to first-year students. Among several genres I typically assign in such a course is the research prospectus, a genre whose primary speech acts include *informing a research director about plans for a project and persuading that director that one has the competence to carry it out*. Of course, all the students in these classes know something in general about *informing* and *persuading*; all their lives they have been informed and persuaded about problems to avoid, things to buy, and courses of action to take. But, when I refer to the speech acts *informing* and *persuading* as they are used in a research prospectus, many of my students don’t really get what I’m talking about. At best, their first efforts are often just imitations of the forms that accompany the speech acts. But how can I *expect* first-year students to know what I am talking about? After all, the research prospectus is a fairly sophisticated genre, inseparable from communities of scholars and their shared research interests. Many beginning college students have trouble imagining that community, let alone participating in it.

So, in trying to create an experiential pedagogy for speech act acquisition in the research class mentioned above, I have to orchestrate classroom circumstances in which students can (a) experience the academic community so that they can (b) experience the speech act in order to (c) identify with it, (d) develop felt senses about it, and, ultimately, (e) acquire it. This is a tall order, indeed. Through the years, of course, writing teachers have tried to get students to identify with communities (academic and otherwise) through “case” assignments, through assignments asking them to write for “real” contexts (such as newspapers), and,

more recently, through assignments asking them to incorporate community service. While the theories inherent in these pedagogies have some value, there is much more to know about how speech act (and discourse) experiencing and identifying take place. As of yet, though, there is little theory to draw upon for help (e.g., see Ivanic).

Therefore, without much theory on which to build an experiential speech act pedagogy, the best I can do when I teach genres such as the research prospectus is to draw heavily on my own experience and my own felt sensing. For instance, if I have myself experienced and identified intimately with the informing and persuading in the prospectus, I can more easily “explicate” them when I present them to my students (Gendlin, *Experiencing* 112). But even more than that, as a teacher I have try to recreate and extend my own experiencing every time I teach the research prospectus. That is, I have to do the best I can to immerse myself and the class in the genre and its speech act core through stories about prospectuses I have written or read and descriptions about the situational circumstances surrounding them. Perhaps, if I do it this way, there will be something infectious about experiencing. After all, as Gendlin tells us, “If someone tells a story, describes experiences, or continues for any length of time on one discourse, or one context, all his [sic] meanings create in us a felt meaning of relevance” (*Experiencing* 135). ☺

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