

Genre Studies, Grice, and Burlesque

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This article: (1) addresses North Carolina's drawls and frog abuses; (2) situates the Gricean maxims as a way to introduce the formal elements of genre studies; (3) explores the deliberate neglect of Gricean maxims and genre conventions in humor writing; and (4) extrapolates the importance—in all writing situations—of a keen awareness of these genre conventions.

Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.

— E. B. White

In 1987, my family moved from Cleveland, Ohio, to Gastonia, North Carolina. We lived in this distant suburb of Charlotte for three years of my life, from first through fourth grade. I learned several things throughout those years: I learned that many words are, in the South, adorned with an extra syllable or at least pronounced quite differently from what I had been accustomed to in Ohio. (Sometimes, this was problematic on dictated spelling tests; “bell,” for instance, is not spelled “bale.”) I also learned how to roller skate; how to resist using the phrase, “y’all”; and how to dissect a frog, a free demonstration of which was provided by a young friend of mine whose identity I shall not reveal for reasons that will soon be apparent. My friend—let’s call him Peter and perhaps pronounce it, “Peta”—lived in the dusky woods near North Carolina’s southern border, so, naturally, we played outside very much during my visits. We spent our time tromping through the woods and riding his little four wheeler—this only after his dad got home, though,

because he had the ATV keys. In the evenings, we caught fireflies and made campfires. It was pastoral.

Catching and detaining fireflies, we'd shake the glass jars to make them light up more. Sometimes, we'd skip the capture and just hit them with tennis rackets—wiffle ball bats didn't work—to watch them flare up in the muggy darkness. I didn't like it when Peter took them out of the jar and squeezed them, but I never protested.

One blazing summer day, Peter showed me a frog he had caught. It was tied to a tree and had been there since late last night, he said. The color on its body was hard to identify, and its belly was beginning to rupture. I watched, horrified, as Peter dug his knee into the thin grass and excitedly explored the frog with his knife.

I hadn't yet been exposed to ethical philosophy (or genre studies), but I still felt it was wrong to dissect a living frog—especially noting in the activity's results a distinct lack of contribution toward *any* scientific end. Somehow, I wasn't able to utter a single protest as Peter's hands grew slimy and red with the gutting. And—according to E. B. White—as I felt then, so now shall you (to say nothing of the frog) as you read the rest of this essay. That is to say, hopefully, Peter became a research scientist; I, in any case, have not, and am only willing to dissect metaphorical frogs for the purposes of killing humor. I'll be gentle, I promise. And, contrary to Peter's unfortunate croaker, rest assured that *our* frog will have been sacrificed for a worthy exploration of comedy writing and genre studies.

Applying Gricean Maxims to Genre Studies

A couple years ago, I encountered a well-known component of the work of linguist H. P. Grice. Grice formulated the “cooperative principle,” including four main properties on which, he claimed, rational and productive conversation is based:

The maxims of **quality**:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The maxim of **relevance**:

1. Be relevant.

The maxims of **quantity**:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The maxims of **manner**:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief.
4. Be orderly.

(“Rules of Conversation” 274-6)

While Grice’s maxims were originally conceived to ensure the practical productivity of conversations (“Rules of Conversation” 273), they can illuminate important components of written communication as well. Applying Grice’s maxims to traditional genres and writing situations can be a helpful way to elucidate the distinct features of the genre being examined. For the sake of illustration, I’ll extrapolate that claim.

The first maxim of quality advises that you don’t “say [or write] what you believe to be false,” while the second maxim of quality advises that you should “not say [or write] that for which you lack adequate evidence.” These maxims certainly appear to prescribe an upright prudence that would be quite useful in convincing one’s audience of her integrity (buttressing her ethos). However, as we might easily observe in the case (pun!) of a public defender whose task it is to argue on behalf of clients they may not wish to advocate, when the public defender writes her closing remarks, it may be her ethical duty to vehemently claim exactly that which she believes to be false and for which she lacks adequate evidence. Given this contrary fact, we can see how complicated this can get and, hence, how important it is to be hyper-aware of the genre conventions that exist within the rhetorical situation or genre in which one is assigned to work.

The case of relevance requires only one maxim: “Be relevant.” This concept seems transparent, its function easily understood in situations of both speaking and writing. Again, however, relevance is distinctly dependent on genre. Take the subject of food as an example. It seems easy to conjure relevant food-related information: serving size; nutritional value; descriptions of taste, texture, and color; list of ingredients; origin of ingredients; nature of preparation; etc. These are all pieces of information in which a consumer may viably be interested. However, the presentation of such information (where, when, and how it appears) deserves special consideration, as all marketing strategists know. Note that, while a detailed list of ingredients is quite relevant to the nutritional label of food at a grocery store, such details generally would be viewed as superfluous and irrelevant to the description of an item on a restaurant’s menu. And while we might be interested to know that McDonald’s oatmeal contains more calories than a Snickers bar (Bittman), calories from sugar is not information that one is likely to find on a menu because we seem to have tacitly decided that menus are not the place

for such nutritional statistics (and because such ill-timed reminders would presumably damage sales at many popular restaurants).

Grice's maxims regarding quantity basically advise us to say, or write, enough but not too much. This also seems fairly clear, but what does it look like in practice? Imagine, for instance, a greeting card. How long is it? How about a how-to manual for assembling a bookshelf? What about an article in a textbook? An autobiographical essay? Various writing situations entail varying levels of complexity. Without considering our purpose, audience, and other contextual factors, it can be very difficult to decide what is enough versus what is too much. Quantity is, therefore, arguably the Gricean component that is *most* dependent on context. Of course, in most English classes, students are consistently given length requirements on writing prompts; if not, we wonder: "How long does it have to be?" (Or, if we feel very tactful, we might inquire: "How long *would you like it* to be?") However, according to our exploration of Grice's quantity maxims, we can see that quantity is entirely dependent on the genre one has chosen to work in, and one's choice of genre is likely dependent on the intentions of her writing (i.e. what she wants her writing to communicate).

There are four maxims for *manner*. However, I would argue that one could cover all four by using easily accessible formats and simple language. George Orwell demonstrates the point, translating this Bible passage (Ecclesiastes 9:11): "I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all" into obscure, ambiguous, and verbose language: "Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account" (qtd. in Pinker 251-2). While the translated passage, with its inflated academic language, may lure an undue respect from the reader, the original is more accessible and communicates its point more concisely, due to its simpler language and syntax.

As demonstrated, it can be illuminating to use Grice's maxims as a framework for analyzing a writing situation. Considering quality, relevance, quantity, and manner can serve as a straightforward way to help one discern the specific conventions of any genre, and to help one identify how she might revise her writing in order to accommodate certain genre conventions.

Imagine a business report that uses poetic language and ambiguous metaphors, or a ghost story that takes the form of a power point presentation; it's very important to note the unlikelihood that readers will take seriously a

text which doesn't adhere to standard genre conventions. However, not all writing is meant to be taken seriously, and “[s]ometimes people violate the maxims on purpose” (“Rules of Conversation” 277). I think it will be fun and helpful to see the farce—intentional or otherwise—that can occur when genre conventions are thoroughly violated. Let's focus, then, on intentional genre violations as a way to generate comic writing.

Grice and Burlesque

One genre in which violating Gricean maxims is completely acceptable is “Burlesque” (a.k.a. “Parody”). Burlesque is “a type of comedy in which distortion and exaggeration are employed to ridicule and deflate, either through the trivialization of a lofty subject or through the glorification of a lowly or common place one. Humor results from the disparity between subject and style” (Murfin and Supryia 46). Successful writers of burlesque and parody trounce Grice's maxims, as they deliberately provide information unfit for the genre they are mocking. It is assumed that the reader's intuitive knowledge of the genre's conventions will allow her to recognize the author's playful intentions. As Isabel Ermida puts it, “[T]he proficient reader is expected to know how to solve the puzzle and enjoy the ensuing comic pleasure” (235). Here, the “proficient reader” is one who is aware of the genre's traditional conventions.

I have made a move toward parody in writing my author's bio for this textbook. And I am willing to bet that you, the proficient reader, when first encountering this bio, intuited that something was amiss. Of course, explaining the specific incongruity with much precision would have been difficult initially. In the first reading of a text, one usually achieves a basic comprehension, rather than a nuanced analysis of form or style. (Initial readings of French theorists produce only profound agitation). Reading a second time, through the Gricean lens, you may notice that, while the quality and quantity are debatably well-suited for the author bio genre, surely the relevance and manner—in large part—are not.

A more thoroughly developed example of burlesque writing is Steve Martin's “Side Effects,” which functions as a parody of the lists of side effects usually found on pharmaceutical drugs' labels. The instructions for Martin's fictional drug advise, “Take two tablets every six hours for joint pain” (55). Following this is the inordinately long and absurd list of side effects, which violates perhaps all four of Grice's maxims:

Side Effects: This drug may cause joint pain, nausea, headache, or shortness of breath. You may also experience muscle aches, rapid

heartbeat, or ringing in the ears. If you feel faint, call your doctor. Do not consume alcohol while taking this pill; likewise, avoid red meat, shellfish, and vegetables. Okay foods: flounder. Under no circumstances eat yak. Men can expect painful urination while sitting, especially if the penis is caught between the toilet seat and the bowl. Projectile vomiting is common in 30 percent of users—sorry: 50 percent.... (55)

This bizarrely robust list continues well into the next few pages, far outreaching our normal expectations of what constitutes a reasonable *quantity* of side effects on a drug's warning label. The author impugns the maxims of *quality* and *manner* with his flippant, conversational tone in correcting the statistical error, "30 percent of users—sorry: 50 percent." This faux pas causes us to question the care taken (and, hence, the truthiness) in preparing the information we're receiving in this list of side effects. Additionally, the manner (referring specifically to concision and clarity) of the previous statement is amiss. Rather than erasing the statistical error, the writer has sort of sloppily "drawn over" it; this creates unnecessary clutter in the passage and causes his meaning to be ambiguous and potentially obscure for the reader. Finally, the overall *relevance* of the author's cautionary counsel comes under suspicion, as he explains that "[m]en can expect painful urination while sitting, especially if the penis is caught between the toilet seat and the bowl." The obviousness of this penis-related detail makes it redundant and, hopefully, irrelevant to the user's circumstance.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that awareness of genre is indispensable for writers of serious *and* humorous texts. Comedy writers often deliberately breach genre parameters in order to mock the genre in which they're writing. These exaggerated subversions of genre can create texts so absurd that they aren't taken seriously. And if violating genre conventions can completely invert the reception of a text, consider the dreadful results of a writer or speaker who *accidentally* violates these conventions.

Technological innovations and pop culture references are far more welcome than they used to be in most contemporary communications situations. In fact, their prevalent presence in commercials has become so common, the genre so deeply ingrained, that we are also able to recognize parodies of it. For instance, Geico—commonly associated with its iconic talking lizard—has recently used the website, Xtranormal, to create a few car insurance commercials. (Xtranormal.com offers a template so that amateurs can create basic animated sequences.) The commercials' animation is poor,

and the voices are lifelessly digitized, causing a bizarre experience for the viewer as she encounters a deliberately clumsy approach to advertising a product that is arguably more deserving of serious treatment than many other products whose commercials employ similar techniques of parody—e.g., beer, deodorant, clothing. (If read as an example of burlesque, one can see that the clumsy, animated *style* of Geico’s Xtranormal commercials do not match the gravity of their product, or *subject*.) Given television advertising’s widespread use of humorous appeals, Geico’s parody of the genre is perhaps less than daring, particularly as the frequent use of these techniques indicates that they must succeed, somehow, in effectively persuading their target demographics. But imagine employment of Xtranormal in other presentations: law enforcement officials using Xtranormal as training supplements in police academies, or detectives using Xtranormal to recreate a crime scene. In these scenarios, such applications of multimedia fail to convey important, detailed information; additionally, they lampoon the importance of the subjects and the significance of the communicators’ goals. Perhaps these are exaggerated examples, but even smaller genre deviations can appear highly conspicuous to those who are very familiar with the given genre. Certainly, then, a writer who means to make a serious inquiry, compose a persuasive piece, or engage in any crucial writing activity should be equally, if not more, aware of her genre’s conventions.

Works Cited

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In rural houses of the rich and semi-famous, the American Idol girl has her grandma's picture on the piano, next to it a jar of the old woman's menstrual blood. An invasive species, a super-food, eighty Illinois autumn berries wait in a different jar and rot, growing mold. **Jamison Lee** is a doctoral student at Illinois State University.