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GENRE HYBRIDS AS MANIFESTATION OF LANGUAGE CREATIVITY IN MODERN AMERICAN MICROFICTION

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Abstract

The paper looks at the notion of genres and genre hybridity in terms of creativity as a meaning-making process. The author provides a brief overview of various approaches to genre and genre classifications in an attempt to prove that in the modern sociocultural setting a more flexible approach to genre attribution is needed and genres should be seen not as fixed conventional forms but as entities with blurred boundaries. The concept of hybridity in literature is considered, particularly with reference to modern microfiction. The author argues that genre hybridity can be viewed as manifestation of creativity in postmodern literature. The goal of the paper is to analyze genre characteristics of modern American microfiction, to demonstrate how different genres can blend in a short text resulting in a variety of original configurations which create and convey new complex meanings. A holistic integrated genre analysis of microfiction is carried out to identify dominant genre characteristics of the hybrid texts, as well as to establish which genres tend to form blends. As the microfiction texts are often published online, the author also discusses whether cyberspace as a new communicative context has a role to play in creating genre hybrids in modern microfiction.

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1. Introduction

Genres and genre classifications have been one of the most widely discussed and controversial topics in linguistic and literary stylistics. Until recently, genres have been considered as a unity of content and form or as typical stable recurrent patterns (Chandler, 1997; Coe & Freedman, 1998). With the establishment of postmodernism in art and literature, which celebrated fragmentation and deconstruction, and the emergence of new communicative settings, this approach to genre had to be reconsidered. Genres have been approached from a variety of perspectives, resulting in a plethora of genre definitions and genre taxonomies (Crowstone & Williams, 2000; Crowstone et al, 2010; Duff, 2000; Tarasova, 2018; Tyupa, 2011). Yet, there has been hardly any consensus regarding the nature of genre, its formal characteristics, and discursive manifestations.

Discussions of hybridity have also been in the limelight for quite a long period of time. As generic hybrids and modifications appeared, the textual, contextual, discursive, and creative aspects of hybridity came to the fore.

2. Problem Statement

One of the most significant long-standing discussions in stylistics is the definition of genre, the elaboration of classification parameters, and genre classifications that would suit a range of research purposes and contexts (Bazerman et al., 2009; Bhatia, 2015; Coe & Freedman, 1998; Duff, 2000). To date, extensive research into genres has been conducted from a variety of perspectives: literary formalist, historical (Tomashevskiy, 2003), functional linguistic, pragmatic, neo-rhetorical (Bakhtin, 1986). Original ideas which later laid the foundation for Neorhetoric can be found in Bakhtin's (1986) work. While previous scholars focused on the differences which distinguish one genre from another, Bakhtin approached genre as a specific type of utterance which is different from other types but share the common verbal language nature with them.

Genres have been viewed in terms of family resemblance (Swales, 1990), prototypicality (Swales 1990), social action (Kress & Knapp, 1992), dynamism of form and function, the role of economic and technological factors, as well as changing audience preferences (Chandler, 1997; Crowstone et al., 2010).

Moreover, with the advent of the Internet new, unheard-of text types emerged thus posing unprecedented challenges for researchers of genres (Goroshko & Zhigalina, 2010). Central to the entire domain is the question whether cyberspace can bring forth entirely new web genres, modify traditional printed genres thus producing hybrids or serve as a medium of participation in a communicative act.

It may seem that researchers can only benefit from a variety of theoretical frameworks within which genre can be and has been studied, however this is not the case.

There has been little agreement so far on "what a genre is, what qualifies for genre status, how genres "work," how we work with genres, how genres work with each other, or how best to identify, construe, or study genres" (Crowstone et al., 2010, p. 71). Indeed, it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify, attribute, and analyze modern creative practices and genre choices, particularly in modern microfiction, using the established approaches to genre and genre taxonomies. Hence, it is now critical to

revise the established approaches to genre and genre classifications or develop new research frameworks which would make it possible to account for modern creative practices.

2.1. Hybridity

Over the past years the concept “hybridity” has been the focus of a number of heated debates (Riesner & Danneck, 2015). Borrowed from biology, the concept of hybridity has been used in literary and linguistic studies to designate processes in which discrete ... structures, that existed in separate ways, combine to generate new structures, objects, and practices in which the preceding elements mix (García-Canclini, 2001).

The term is often discussed in relation to creolization, contamination, syncretism, transculturation, and inbetweenness to refer, rather loosely, to a disparate body of subjects in widely differing domains (Guingery, 2011).

Genre-wise, hybridity has been construed as a combination of two or more genres to form a new genre or a single work (Duff, 2000). Bakhtin (1986) construed hybridity as closely related to the concept of polyphony, dialogism, and heteroglossia. For him “the process of hybridization—hybridization is the dynamic on-going process while hybridity is the end result—entails the combination of two languages” (Guingery, 2011, p. 2).

The controversy about genre hybridity is whether it should be seen as an intrinsic feature of modern literary genres or as a result of postmodernist artistic influence.

2.2. Creativity

As defined in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.), creativity is “the ability to make or otherwise bring into existence something new, whether a new solution to a problem, a new method or device, or a **new artistic object or form**” (<https://www.britannica.com/> – Highlighted by K. Golubina).

In functional stylistics, where genres have been seen as pertaining to specific functional styles, creativity can be regarded as a process of meaning construction whereby authors of different text types draw on their creative potential and genre taxonomy to create a new meaning within an established form. Moreover, in the context of contemporary multimodal communication “design or shape” of a text acquires additional stylistic importance and affects the meaning-making process (Seskutova, 2018).

It should be noted that generally creativity can be characterized as being dynamic, cross-disciplinary, non-linear, and highly personal. One may assume that these features are to be found in genre hybrids. By mixing and blending different forms authors and readers may engage in creative meaning-making and interpretation.

3. Research Questions

The paper seeks to address the following research questions:

- a) how traditional approaches to genre and genre classifications have changed over time, if at all;
- b) how postmodernism in literature has affected the perception of genres and their discourse manifestations;

- c) whether new perceptions of genre are better suited as analytical tools for genre configurations that are to be found in modern microfiction;
- d) whether genre hybridity can be regarded as manifestation of creativity; and, finally,
- e) what types of genre hybrids as new creative configurations can be found in modern American microfiction.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to review briefly the recent research into genres, their boundaries and genre classifications, as well as to examine the notion of hybridity, especially in relation to modern American microfiction and drabbles (Boddy, 2010; Ben-Porat, 2011; Shapard, 1986; Shapard & Thomas, 2006).

We will attempt to show that genre hybridity can be regarded as a creative communication process whereby authors of modern American microfiction and drabbles make conscious, yet, unusual genre choices in order to create and communicate new meanings and stylistic effects.

We will briefly consider the significance of cyberspace for genre hybridization in microfiction as most of the modern microfiction and drabbles are published in e-zines (electronic magazines) on the Internet, rather than appear in the traditional paper format. The question is whether the new, cyber environment determines the genre specificity of microfiction or only serves as a convenient setting allowing quick access to quality fiction.

5. Research Methods

A variety of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, have been used to carry out the research. Specialist literature review has been completed to show the state-of-the-art research into genres, including Internet genres, hybridity, creativity, and microfiction. Twenty modern American microfiction texts and drabbles were selected on the basis of their compliance with the formal characteristics (Ben-Porat, 2011; Guimarães, 2012; Golubina, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Shapard, 1986). A holistic genre analysis was then carried out to identify features of which genre are most prominent in the examples under consideration. By holistic in the current research we mean an integrated method that combines the traditional formal approach to genre analysis with the discourse analysis of texts as manifestations of linguistic and extralinguistic factors. The microfiction and drabbles were further classified according to most prominent features of different genres that blended within a text to form a genre hybrid and the resulting hybrids identified and described.

6. Findings

The analysis of modern American microfiction texts and drabbles revealed that unlike short stories, microfiction displays a number of distinct structural, discursive, and linguistic stylistic characteristics. Its key formal characteristic is the length of the text – approximately 300 words for microfiction and 100 words for a drabble, though exceptions may occur.

Another distinctive structural feature is plot deficiency, which means that most stories lacked some of the conventional elements of a plot, mostly, the exposition. The stories displayed a high degree of information compression, which enhanced the implicitness and understatement in the stories.

Among other distinctive features are an open or unexpected ending, no character development, an interplay of discourse forms, mostly narration, description, and internalized speech. This may account for the fact that microfiction can easily form hybrids with other genres thus enhancing the creative potential thereof.

Moreover, several types of hybrids were identified where microfiction and drabbles fused with the genres of letters, personal notes, jokes, autobiographies, and advertisements.

However, within the framework of the research into microfiction genre modifications, no significant data bearing out the initial assumption that cyberspace may have a role to play in hybridization process were obtained.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to research genre hybrids from the perspective of language creativity in modern American microfiction. While doing so, the author traced the changes that traditional genres and genre classifications had undergone in the postmodernist era, explored the notion of hybridity in terms of its creative potential and identified genre configurations in modern American microfiction and drabbles. It was claimed that genre hybridity should not be seen as a threat to canonical genres but rather as a reflection of postmodern tendencies towards fragmentation and boundary blurring. Consequently, modern genres can be looked upon as “fluid” entities that allow for a variety of cross-genre modifications where new meanings are created and communicated. Thus, to get a better insight into emerging hybrid genres, our perceptions of genre and of classification parameters should be reconsidered; they should embrace a new postmodern cultural context and new social and communicative practices.

The analysis of modern American microfiction and drabbles revealed that unlike short stories, microfiction and drabbles display a number of distinct structural, discursive, and linguistic stylistic characteristics. This fact may explain that these text types can easily form hybrids with other genres thus enhancing their creative potential. Moreover, several types of hybrids were identified where fictional texts acquired the form of letters, personal notes, jokes, autobiographies, and advertisements thus making genre identification and text attribution difficult.

However, within the framework of the research into microfiction genre modifications no significant data bearing out the initial assumption that cyberspace may have a role to play in hybridization process were obtained. A tentative conclusion can be drawn that in the current research, cyberspace can be said to ease the access for the audience rather than determine the hybrid nature of the genre.

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