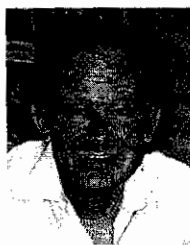


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## Writing about Writing

Downs and Wardle, Boston: Bedford St Martin's, 2011.



# The Concept of Discourse Community

JOHN SWALES

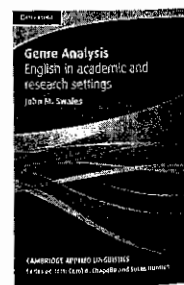
Swales, John. "The Concept of Discourse Community." *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Boston: Cambridge UP, 1990. 21-32. Print.

### Framing the Reading

John Swales is a professor of linguistics and codirector of the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English at the University of Michigan. He received his Ph.D. from Cambridge University and has spent most of his career in linguistics working with nonnative speakers of English on strategies to help them succeed as readers and writers in the university. His publications include *English in Today's Research World* (2000) and *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (2004) (both coauthored with Christine Feak), *Research Genres* (2004), and *Episodes in ESP* (1985; **ESP** stands for English for Specific Purposes, a research area devoted to the teaching and learning of English for specific communities).

This excerpt is a chapter of a book Swales wrote called *Genre Analysis*. In it, he refers to concepts discussed previously in the book, which will be somewhat confusing since you have not read his book's preceding chapters. In the beginning of this chapter, Swales also refers to an ongoing academic argument over the social (**constructed**) nature of language use and to arguments about what a **discourse community** is and how it is different from a **speech community**. You likely will not fully understand this discussion, since you may not be familiar with the academic debates to which he refers. What's important for you to understand is simply that a lot of people think that *discourse community* is an important enough concept to argue about. Once Swales gets through this background/framing material, he goes on to define the term himself in section 2.3, since he thinks other people's definitions have not been clear and specific enough. This is where you should really start paying attention. As Swales defines his six characteristics of a discourse community, you should try to imagine groups you belong to that exhibit all six of these characteristics.

Be aware that Swales's style of writing is a little dry and formal, and he may use specialized linguistic terms that you don't understand. He is good, however, at highlighting his main claims and defining his terms, so if you pay close attention, he should clear up most of your confusion. If he uses terms that he does not define, and with which you are not familiar (for example, **lexis**), be sure to take a moment to look them up in a dictionary. You need to use the six characteristics he



describes to analyze communities you are familiar with, so it is important that you understand his definition.

One of the most important—and complex—of Swales’s characteristics is **genre**. Unfortunately, Swales does not spend much time defining this term because he assumes that his readers are familiar with it. *Genres* are types of texts that are recognizable to readers and writers, and that meet the needs of the **rhetorical situations** in which they function. So, for example, we recognize wedding invitations and understand them as very different from horoscopes. We know that, when we are asked to write a paper for school, our teacher probably does not want us to turn in a poem instead.

Genres develop over time in response to recurring **rhetorical** needs. We have wedding invitations because people keep getting married and we need an efficient way to let people know and to ask them to attend. Rather than making up a new rhetorical solution every time the same situation occurs, we generally turn to the genre that has developed—in this case, the genre of the wedding invitation.

Swales demonstrates that discourse communities all use genres, many of which are recognizable to people outside the group (for example, memos or reports), but he notes that groups develop their own **conventions** for those genres in light of their desired goals. So memos written within AT&T, for example, might look very different from memos written by the members of the local school board.

It might be helpful to think of genres as textual tools used by groups of people as they work toward their desired ends; genres and the conventions that guide them change as the community discovers more efficient adaptations, as group membership changes, or as the group’s desired ends change. For example, consider a team of biologists studying the effect of industrial pollutants on the cell structure of microorganisms in a particular body of water. In doing their research and reporting on it, the team of biologists will use many genres that are recognized outside of their discourse community, including research logs, notebooks, lab reports, conference presentations, and published scholarly papers; in many cases, however, they will have developed discourse-specific conventions guiding the production of these genres (for example, the Council of Science Editors’ rules for documentation in published papers). As is the case in every discourse community, the genres and conventions that biologists use continue to change, in part as a result of new technologies (the Internet, computerized data analysis tools) that help them analyze and disseminate information in ever more efficient ways.

### Getting Ready to Read

*Before you read*, do at least one of the following activities:

- Look up Swales’s book *Genre Analysis* on a book-buying Web site or Wikipedia and read at least two reviews of it. See if you can find a listing of its table of contents. How much do you think you’re missing by reading only a single chapter? (Do you feel inspired to find the book and read the rest?)
- Write a brief description of a time you’ve felt “out of place.” What made you feel that way?

As you read, consider the following questions:

- How does what Swales describes relate to your own experience moving among different groups or communities?
- What are potential problems with Swales's explanations—places they *don't* line up with your own experiences?
- How would you describe the audience Swales seems to imagine himself writing to?

## 2.1 A Need for Clarification

Discourse community, the first of three terms to be examined in Part II, has so far been principally appropriated by instructors and researchers adopting a 'Social View' (Faigley, 1986) of the writing process. Although I am not aware of the original provenance of the term itself, formative influences can be traced to several of the leading 'relativist' or 'social constructionist' thinkers of our time. Herzberg (1986) instances Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric* (1969), Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) and Fish's *Is There a Text in this Class?* (1980). Porter (1988) discusses the significance of Foucault's analysis of 'discursive formations' in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972); other contributors are Rorty (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 1979) and Geertz (*Local Knowledge*, 1983), with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1958) as an earlier antecedent (Bruffee, 1986), particularly perhaps for the commentary therein on 'language games' (3.5).

Whatever the genealogy of the term discourse community, the relevant point in the present context is that it has been appropriated by the 'social perspectivists' for their variously applied purposes in writing research. It is this use that I wish to explore and in turn appropriate. Herzberg (1986) sets the scene as follows:

Use of the term 'discourse community' testifies to the increasingly common assumption that discourse operates within conventions defined by communities, be they academic disciplines or social groups. The pedagogies associated with writing across the curriculum and academic English now use the notion of 'discourse communities' to signify a cluster of ideas: that language use in a group is a form of social behavior, that discourse is a means of maintaining and extending the group's knowledge and of initiating new members into the group, and that discourse is epistemic or constitutive of the group's knowledge.

(Herzberg, 1986:1)

Irrespective of the merits of this 'cluster of ideas', the cluster is, I suggest, *consequential* of the assumption that there are indeed entities identifiable as discourse communities, not *critical* for establishing or identifying them. They point us towards asking *how* a particular discourse community uses its discursal

conventions to initiate new members or *how* the discourse of another reifies particular values or beliefs. While such questions are well worth asking, they do not directly assist with the logically prior ones of how we recognize such communities in the first place.

Herzberg in fact concedes that there may be a definitional problem: “The idea of “discourse community” is not well defined as yet, but like many imperfectly defined terms, it is suggestive, the center of a set of ideas rather than the sign of a settled notion” (1986:1). However, if discourse community is to be ‘the center of a set of ideas’—as it is in this book—then it becomes reasonable to expect it to be, if not a settled notion, at least one that is sufficiently explicit for others to be able to accept, modify or reject on the basis of the criteria proposed.

Several other proponents of the ‘social view’, while believing that discourse community is a powerful and useful concept, recognize it currently raises as many questions as it answers. Porter (1988:2), for instance, puts one set of problems with exemplary conciseness: ‘Should discourse communities be determined by shared objects of study, by common research methodology, by opportunity and frequency of communication, or by genre and stylistic conventions?’ Fennell et al. (1987) note that current definitions have considerable vagueness and in consequence offer little guidance in identifying discourse communities. They further point out that definitions which emphasize the reciprocity of ‘discourse’ and ‘community’ (community involves discourse and discourse involves community) suffer the uncomfortable fate of ending up circular.

We need then to clarify, for procedural purposes, what is to be understood by discourse community and, perhaps in the present circumstances, it is better to offer a set of criteria sufficiently narrow that it will eliminate many of the marginal, blurred and controversial contenders. A ‘strong’ list of criteria will also avoid the circularity problem, because in consequence it will certainly follow that not all communities—as defined on other criteria—will be discourse communities, just as it will follow that not all discourse activity is relevant to discourse community consolidation.

An exclusionary list will also presumably show that the kind of disjunctive question raised by Porter is misplaced. It is likely to show that neither shared object of study nor common procedure nor interaction nor agreed discursual convention will themselves individually be necessary and sufficient conditions for the emergence of a discourse community, although a combination of some or all might. Conversely, the absence of any one (different subject areas, conflicting procedures, no interaction, and multiple discourse conventions) may be enough to prevent discourse community formation—as international politics frequently reminds us.

We need then to clarify, for procedural purposes, what is to be understood by discourse community and, perhaps in the present circumstances, it is better to offer a set of criteria sufficiently narrow that it will eliminate many of the marginal, blurred and controversial contenders.

It is possible, of course, that there is no pressing need to clarify the concept of *discourse community* because, at the end of the account, it will turn out to be nothing more than composition specialists' convenient translation of the long-established concept of *speech community* common to sociolinguistics and central to the ethnography of communication. This view, for example, would seem to be the position of Freed and Broadhead (1987). After a couple of opening paragraphs on *speech community* in linguistics and on audience analysis, they observe, 'only recently have compositional studies begun to investigate communities of writers and readers, though the terminology seems to be changing to "discourse communities" in order to signal the focus on the written rather than the spoken' (1987:154). Whether it is appropriate to identify *discourse community* with a subset of *speech community* is the topic of the next section.

## 2.2 Speech Communities and Discourse Communities

Speech community has been an evolving concept in sociolinguistics and the consequent variety of definitional criteria has been discussed—among others—by Hudson (1980), Saville-Troike (1982) and especially by Braithwaite (1984). At the outset, a speech community was seen as being composed of those who share similar *linguistic rules* (Bloomfield, 1933), and in those terms we could legitimately refer to, say, the speech community of the English-speaking world. Later, Labov will emphasize 'shared norms' rather than shared performance characteristics but still conclude that 'New York City is a single speech community, and not a collection of speakers living side by side, borrowing occasionally from each other's dialects' (Labov, 1966:7). Others, such as Fishman (1971), have taken as criterial patterned regularities in the *use* of language. In consequence, a speech community is seen as being composed of those who share functional rules that determine the appropriacy of utterances. Finally, there are those such as Hymes who argue for multiple criteria:

A speech community is defined, then, tautologically but radically, as a community sharing knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech. Such sharing comprises knowledge of at least one form of speech, and knowledge also of its patterns of use. Both conditions are necessary.

(Hymes, 1974:51)

There are a number of reasons why I believe even a tight definition of speech community (shared linguistic forms, shared regulative rules and shared cultural concepts) will not result in making an alternative definition of discourse community unnecessary. The first is concerned with medium; not so much in the trivial sense that 'speech' just will not do as an exclusive modifier of communities that are often heavily engaged in writing, but rather in terms of what that literary activity implies. Literacy takes away locality and parochiality, for members are more likely to communicate with other members in distant places, and are more likely to react and respond to writings rather than speech from the past.

A second reason for separating the two concepts derives from the need to distinguish a *sociolinguistic* grouping from a *sociorhetorical* one. In a sociolinguistic speech community, the communicative needs of the *group*, such as socialization or group solidarity, tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discorsal characteristics. The primary determinants of linguistic behavior are social. However, in a sociorhetorical discourse community, the primary determinants of linguistic behavior are functional, since a discourse community consists of a group of people who link up in order to pursue objectives that are prior to those of socialization and solidarity, even if these latter should consequently occur. In a discourse community, the communicative needs of the *goals* tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discorsal characteristics.

Thirdly, in terms of the fabric of society, speech communities are centripetal (they tend to absorb people into that general fabric), whereas discourse communities are centrifugal (they tend to separate people into occupational or speciality-interest groups). A speech community typically inherits its membership by birth, accident or adoption; a discourse community recruits its members by persuasion, training or relevant qualification. To borrow a term from the kind of association readers of this book are likely to belong to, an archetypal discourse community tends to be a *Specific Interest Group*.

### 2.3 A Conceptualization of Discourse Community

I would now like to propose six defining characteristics that will be necessary and sufficient for identifying a group of individuals as a discourse community.

1. *A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.* These public goals may be formally inscribed in documents (as is often the case with associations and clubs), or they may be more tacit. The goals are *public*, because spies may join speech and discourse communities for hidden purposes of subversion, while more ordinary people may join organizations with private hopes of commercial or romantic advancement. In some instances, but not in many, the goals may be high level or abstract. In a Senate or Parliament there may well exist overtly adversarial groups of members, but these adversaries may broadly share some common objective as striving for improved government. In the much more typical non-adversarial discourse communities, reduction in the broad level of agreement may fall to a point where communication breaks down and the discourse community splits. It is commonality of goal, not shared object of study that is criterial, even if the former often subsumes the latter. But not always. The fact that the shared object of study is, say, the Vatican, does not imply that students of the Vatican in history departments, the Kremlin, dioceses, birth control agencies and liberation theology seminaries form a discourse community.
2. *A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.*

The participatory mechanisms will vary according to the community: meetings, telecommunications, correspondence, newsletters, conversations and so forth. This criterion is quite stringent because it produces a negative answer to the case of 'The Café Owner Problem' (Najjar, personal communication). In generalized form, the problem goes as follows: individuals A, B, C and so on occupy the same professional roles in life. They interact (in speech and writing) with the same clientele; they originate, receive and respond to the same kind of messages for the same purposes; they have an approximately similar range of genre skills. And yet, as Café owners working long hours in their own establishments, and not being members of the Local Chamber of Commerce, A, B and C never interact with one another. Do they form a discourse community? We can notice first that 'The Café Owner Problem' is not quite like those situations where A, B and C operate as 'point'. A, B and C may be lighthouse keepers on their lonely rocks, or missionaries in their separate jungles, or neglected consular officials in their rotting outposts. In all these cases, although A, B and C may never interact, they all have lines of communication back to base, and presumably acquired discourse community membership as a key element in their initial training.

Bizzell (1987) argues that the café owner kind of social group will be a discourse community because 'its members may share the social-class-based or ethnically-based discursive practices of people who are likely to become café owners in their neighborhood' (1987:5). However, even if this sharing of discursive practice occurs, it does not resolve the logical problem of assigning membership of a community to individuals who neither admit nor recognize that such a community exists.

3. *A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback.* 14

Thus, membership implies uptake of the informational opportunities. Individuals might pay an annual subscription to the *Acoustical Society of America* but if they never open any of its communications they cannot be said to belong to the discourse community, even though they are formally members of the society. The secondary purposes of the information exchange will vary according to the common goals: to improve performance in a football squad or in an orchestra, to make money in a brokerage house, to grow better roses in a gardening club, or to dent the research front in an academic department.

4. *A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.* 15

A discourse community has developed and continues to develop discursive expectations. These may involve appropriacy of topics, the form, function and positioning of discursive elements, and the roles texts play in the operation of the discourse community. In so far as 'genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them' (Martin, 1985:250), these discursive expectations are created by the *genres* that articulate the operations of the discourse community. One of the purposes of this criterion is

to question discourse community status for new or newly-emergent groupings. Such groupings need, as it were, to settle down and work out their communicative proceedings and practices before they can be recognized as discourse communities. If a new grouping 'borrows' genres from other discourse communities, such borrowings have to be assimilated.

5. *In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis.* 16

This specialization may involve using lexical items known to the wider speech communities in special and technical ways, as in information technology discourse communities, or using highly technical terminology as in medical communities. Most commonly, however, the inbuilt dynamic towards an increasingly shared and specialized terminology is realized through the development of community-specific abbreviations and acronyms. The use of these (ESL, EAP, WAC, NCTE, TOEFL, etc.) is, of course, driven by the requirements for efficient communication exchange between experts. It is hard to conceive, at least in the contemporary English-speaking world, of a group of well-established members of a discourse community communicating among themselves on topics relevant to the goals of the community and not using lexical items puzzling to outsiders. It is hard to imagine attending perchance the convention of some group of which one is an outsider and understanding every word. If it were to happen—as might occur in the inaugural meeting of some quite new grouping—then that grouping would not yet constitute a discourse community.

6. *A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise.* 17

Discourse communities have changing memberships; individuals enter as apprentices and leave by death or in other less involuntary ways. However, survival of the community depends on a reasonable ratio between novices and experts.

## 2.4 An Example of a Discourse Community

As we have seen, those interested in discourse communities have typically 18 sited their discussions within academic contexts, thus possibly creating a false impression that such communities are only to be associated with intellectual paradigms or scholarly cliques. Therefore, for my principal example of a discourse community, I have deliberately chosen one that is not academic, but which nevertheless is probably typical enough of many others. The discourse community is a hobby group and has an 'umbrella organization' called the Hong Kong Study Circle, of which I happen to be a member. The aims of the HKSC (note the abbreviation) are to foster interest in and knowledge of the stamps of Hong Kong (the various printings, etc.) and of their uses (postal rates, cancellations, etc.). Currently there are about 320 members scattered across the world, but with major concentrations in Great Britain, the USA and Hong Kong itself and minor ones in Holland and Japan. Based on the membership list, my guess is that about a third of the members are non-native speakers of