

## Review Article

# A Review on the Book of *On the Symbiosis of Discourse Types*

Youping Jing

School of Translation Studies, Shandong University, Weihai, China

### Email address:

644953533@qq.com

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**Abstract:** This paper gives a critical review on the book of *On the Symbiosis of Discourse Types*. In this book, the author, Xinfang Liu clarifies the symbiosis of the three discourse types from the perspective of rhetorical reciprocity, and proposes a comprehensive model of discourse types in the writing practice. He finds that the current problems of English writing teaching in China are the gaps between writing teaching research, textbook research and the publication of foreign language writing textbooks, and the rigidity and abstraction in the textbook edition and the writing teaching processes, thus applying the model of discourse types to the English writing teaching. Therefore, the strengths of this book lie in both theoretical and practical aspects. Besides the advantages, this book can be refined by illustrating the theory based on a corpus about everyday conversations for the studies of discourse types are closely related to people's daily life. In addition, this work can also be improved by paying more attention to the differences between first language writing and the foreign language one because the thinking patterns and cultures lying in these two are not similar.

**Keywords:** Discourse Types, Symbiosis, English Writing Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Discourse type research is an ancient but cutting-edge study field which draws the attention of numerous academics. They focus on different aspects of this topic. Some are inclined to explore the theoretical value of it, for example, Beaugrande & Dressler (1981) in *Introduction to Text Linguistics* illustrate the nature of the "discourse type" and introduce it as a broad concept that can be used to conclude many categories of text [1]. Johansson (1985), on the other hand, in his article divides the discourses from LOB corpus into 15 categories and then studies the linguistic features of different discourse types. He finds that the notional words and functional words applied in different discourse types are quite different [2]. Liu & Li (2019) in their article explore the rules of complex sentences in the foreground of narrative and argumentative discourses and find that the use of complex sentences is closely related to the type of discourses [3]. Whereas, some pay more attention to its practical usage, for instance, Johns (1997) in *Text, Role, and Context: Developing Academic Literacies* examines the

fundamental issues relating to student literacies and instructor roles and academic contexts. The author argues that the knowledge of discourse types provides the beginners with a shortcut in their practice of written texts [4]. Bhatia (1993) analyses different genres used in different occupations [5]. The author then puts forward the critical genre analysis to help the understanding of the specific language used in different professions [6]. The studies mentioned above show that the previous investigations on discourse types have rich contents which lay a solid foundation for the following research on it. However, the classifications of different discourse types are highly complicated and that may hinder the studies on them. In addition, though the former studies on discourse types have ever mentioned the relationships among different discourse types [7-11], they rarely focus on the classifications of the discourse types. Recently, Xinfang Liu, a Chinese scholar who is an expert in Rhetoric and Writing, has turned his attention to the specialized investigations of the categorizations of different discourse types in *On the Symbiosis of Discourse Types*. In this work, Liu clarifies the symbiosis of genre, modes of discourse and strategies of thesis text from the

perspective of rhetorical reciprocity and innovatively applies the theories of discourse types to the teaching of English writing in China. This paper will give the summary of the contents of this book, and then makes brief comments on the features of it in the following paragraphs.

## 2. The Summary of the Contents of the Book

### 2.1. The Introduction Part of the Book

The author divides this book into eight chapters. As an academic monograph, this book begins in introducing the reasons for writing, refreshing the definitions of the main concepts such as discourse, discourse types (genre, modes of discourse and strategies of thesis text) and symbiosis in Chapter 1. Liu also clarifies the research purposes, research value, the theoretical framework and research methods in this chapter.

As an ancient topic in the academic world, the studies on discourse types can be traced back to the classification of oral texts in the ancient Greek period. After that, scholars have conducted in-depth research on this topic from different aspects in the following 2400 years. In Chapter 2, Liu reviews the investigations on this topic from the aspects of the three ones Hyon (1996) mentions in his paper, English for Specific Purposes, North American / New Rhetoric and the Sydney School [12], and the other three aspects, Discourse Linguistics, Corpus Linguistics and Translation. He finds that there are problems in research, such as unclear definition boundaries of different discourse types, few studies on the development processes and applications of them. And this book would discuss these issues, thus clarifying its research value.

### 2.2. Theoretical Construction

As mentioned above, from Chapter 3 to Chapter 8, this book would examine the existing problems in the previous studies of discourse types one by one. Therefore, in Chapter 3, the author starts with concluding the development processes of the three discourse types and then summarizes the advantages and shortcomings of the three separately: First, the “genres” can not only help the writers organize the articles in a more professional way but also do good to the better understanding of readers. However, the classifications of genres are too chaotic to be taught in the writing classes and be applied to the writing processes. Second, “the modes of discourses” provides a clear structure for writers to follow in their writing processes, but it is so abstract that sometimes it is not suitable for the real daily conversations or writing practices. Third, “the strategies of thesis text” includes the thinking processes in the writing which benefits the writers in the logical organization of the passages, but to some extent, the investigations on this discourse type are far fewer than the other two ones. What’s more, if the teachers or the writers only utilize several strategies in teaching or writing, the thinking patterns in the writing works may be rigid. As a result, the

rationality of the long-term coexistence of the three discourse types are expounded at the end of this chapter.

The theoretical bases of the three discourse types are introduced in Chapter 4. The “genres” is theoretically based on the “cultural elements”, for both of them share numerous features, for instance, they are closely related to the human society, and they exist in a group of people, not in a single person. The theoretical base of the “modes of discourses” is the “linguistic features”. Because every mode of discourses has its own linguistic features, like in the descriptive discourses, similes and metaphors are more common than they are in other modes of discourses. As for the “strategies of thesis text”, it is based on the “thinking patterns”, thus providing the writers with the guidance of organizing the articles. Besides the introduction of the theoretical bases, Liu further demonstrates the symbiosis of the three discourse types from the inextricable relationships of their theoretical bases through analogical reasoning.

In Chapter 5, Liu moves to describe the research perspective of the discourse types, rhetorical reciprocity. He clarifies it through the analysis of the Kairos Theory, Bitzer’s (1968) Rhetorical Situation [13], Burke’s (1973) New Rhetorical Situation [14], Richards’ (1936) Interaction Theory of Metaphor [15], Bakhtin’s (2009) Dialogism [16], Burke’s (1973) Identification Theory and Habermas’ (2004) Communication Action Theory [17] and explains the symbiosis discussed in Chapter 4 from it. The author explains that writing, to some extent, are interactions of the writers and the readers, of the writers and the passages, of the culture elements, language features and the thinking patterns.

### 2.3. The Application of the Discourse Type Theories

Besides the theoretical construction, this book is also concerned with the application of the symbiosis theory in the teaching of English writing. In Chapter 6, Liu explains the respective applications of the three discourse types in China and points out the problems existing in writing teaching and its materials: First, the genres that recently in use are not included in the newly published textbooks. Second, “modes of discourse”, which is somewhat out of date, is still the core point in organizing these textbooks. Third, the usage of “strategies of thesis text” is confined to the argumentative writings, but the theoretical base of this discourse type, thinking patterns, can be widely used in various types of writings. He then discusses the applicability of the symbiosis theory in solving the current problems, arguing that teachers should have a symbiotic view of discourse types in writing teaching and the ability to encourage students to write in the appropriate rhetorical situations.

As for the improvement of the quality of the teaching materials of English writing, Liu explains in Chapter 7 that the materials can be refined by adapting foreign things to Chinese needs. Therefore, he examines the characteristics of eight freshman English writing textbooks published in the United States in the 21st century, and summarizes the suggestions from them. He advises that the materials should be improved

by paying attention to the symbiosis of discourse types and writing norms on the content of the materials, focusing on effectiveness for a given period of time in the revision and adding some proper reading materials to combine writing with reading.

In Chapter 8, Liu concludes this book with its core argument that the three discourse types (genre, modes of discourse and strategies of thesis text), though dominated the writing practice separately in the different periods, they are now closely related to one another in the symbiosis. What's more, the theory of the symbiosis of discourse types from the perspective of rhetorical reciprocity can not only do good to the English teaching practice but also to the improvement of the teaching materials, thus demonstrating the theoretical and practical value of the study in this book. On the other hand, the author also summarizes the shortcomings of this book and outlook on the further research. He suggests that the multi-modal discourse studies are particularly promising in the further investigations of discourse types and their usage.

### 3. Comments on the Book

#### 3.1. *The Strengths of This Book*

As mentioned in the first paragraph, this book is one of the few books that specialized in the study of the symbiosis of the discourse types. It is valuable in both theoretical and practical ways.

##### 3.1.1. *The Theoretical Value*

In general, compared with the similar books on this topic, the great theoretical strengths of this book lie in the following points: First, it clarifies the symbiosis of the three discourse types, and lays the foundation for the similar studies in the research content. Although "strategies of thesis text" plays an important role in the studies of discourse, the previous investigations have not clearly defined its category. In this book, the author puts "strategies of thesis text" in the same category as "genre" and "modes of discourse", and by doing this, the close relationships of the three discourse types can be understood better.

Second, this book helps to improve the weak spots of the investigations on the theoretical history of the discourse types. The previous studies on the development trace of the discourse types do not give reasons for the rise and decline of their usage and some statements in these investigations are inconsistent with the facts. For example, Connors (1981, 1997) analyses the history of modes of discourse from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup>, and insists that modes of discourse have disappeared [18-19]. But the fact is that it is still widely used in China at present. In view of the above-mentioned facts, Liu applies historiography in the third chapter of this book to study the development paths of the three discourse types and then concludes the causes of their advantages and shortcomings, thus demonstrating the rationality of the symbiosis of them.

Third, Liu proposes a comprehensive model of discourse types from a broader angle of view. He explains the symbiosis

of discourse types from the perspective of rhetorical reciprocity by using the theory of Rhetorical Situation, which goes beyond the former intra-sentence and context-dependent analysis. In the rhetorical reciprocity theory, the audience, the rhetor, the rhetorical purpose, exigence, constraint, media, subject matter and the culture, etc. are taken into consideration during the writing processes and that can result in the reader's better understanding of the articles with richer culture background, clearer logic chain and more accurate language expressions, thus contributing to the benign interactions between the writer and the reader.

In addition, this book, to a certain extent, makes up the long-time gaps between the writing teaching research, textbook research and the publishing of the textbooks about English writing teaching in China. For instance, Liu mentions that the number of textbooks about English writing teaching has increased sharply in the 21<sup>st</sup> and reached 1173 in the year of 2011 in the China National Digital Library record. But these books have seldom been revised. What's more, the number of the studies about English writing teaching in 2000-2007 are fewer than 60 (p. 116). Therefore, these foreign writing teaching textbooks in China which increase at a rapid speed are characterized as highly repetitive and with low innovation. The studies in this book are effective complement to the previous research and can to some extent, help to refine the foreign language writing teaching textbooks.

##### 3.1.2. *The Practical Value*

Besides the theoretical value, this book is also an effective supplement to China's current English writing teaching. Since "modes of discourse" has dominated the English writing teaching, the teaching materials and processes are kind of abstract and rigid (p. 112). According to Gao & Wen (2017), although the language elements are extremely important in the foreign language writing, the thinking patterns are also vital in the writing process [20]. Ren & Hitchcock (2013), on the other hand, in their article argue that as native-Chinese undergraduate English majors, although they have specialized in English as a Foreign Language for four years, in addition to six years in high school, they still rely on their first-language thinking patterns in organizing and managing their ideas in writing [21]. Therefore, the introducing of the symbiosis of discourse types to the writing teaching can help the teachers and the students to focus not only on the linguistic features but also on the underlying culture and thinking pattern elements while writing, thus doing good to solve the existing problems in China's English writing teaching materials and processes.

#### 3.2. *The Shortcomings of This Book*

Although this book has made significant breakthroughs, there are still some shortcomings: First, this book pays less attention to the quantitative research. The objects of the study, discourse types and the rhetorical situation are closely related to the daily conversions. It can be more persuasive if the author illustrates the theory of discourse types on the basis of a corpus about the real-life conversations.

Second, the author is rarely concerned about the differences

between first language writing and foreign language one. He draws on the advantages of American writing textbooks and applies them to the improvement of the English writing teaching ones in China. Though strengths of the former can benefit the later, the ways of thinking are not alike in first and foreign language writings and require to be taken into consideration while analyzing.

Third, some data in this book are not updated in time. For example, in the counting of the number of English writing teaching textbooks published in the China National Digital Library, the data were collected by the year of 2011 (p. 115), and this book was published in 2018. Defects cannot belittle virtues.

## 4. Conclusion

In this paper, the contents of the book *On the Symbiosis of Discourse Types* are first briefly concluded. In his work, Liu focuses on the exploring of the relationships among different discourse types by using the method of historiography. He then puts forward the symbiosis of the three ones (symbiosis of genre, modes of discourse and strategies of thesis text) from the perspective of rhetorical reciprocity after the carefully analyzing of the Rhetorical Situation. In addition, he applies this theory to the English writing teaching in China and finds that it can help to solve the exiting problems. Therefore, this book has important theoretical value and practical guiding significance for English writing teaching in China.

However, on the other hand, this book also has some drawbacks. It can be improved by examining the theory based on a corpus about everyday conversations, paying more attention to the differences between first language writing and foreign language one and updating the data in time. The defects cannot obscure the virtues, however, this book is still particularly valuable for both researchers interested in the discourse types and the teachers teaching writing in foreign language.

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