

News, Announcements

Conference Report

Grammar and Genre. Interfaces and influences
Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland
24–26 October 2012

The reasons for attending the conference were threefold. First, Åbo Akademi University ranks among Europe's premier internationally acknowledged research universities. Second, the theme of the conference perfectly matches and mirrors the research project carried out at the Department of English and American Studies in Ostrava, which centres on the form and function of academic, institutional and mass-media genres – currently being investigated by our research team from the perspective of Michael Halliday's concept of the interpersonal metafunction. Third, Åbo Akademi University is inseparably associated with Nils Erik Enkvist, who has earned a world-wide reputation among most textually-oriented linguists and whose influence on his colleagues and students is still palpable.

The conference was organized by SKY, a seemingly English acronym of the Finnish *Suomen kielitieteellinen yhdistys* (the *Linguistic Association of Finland*) in collaboration with the Faculty of Humanities of Åbo Akademi University. Proceedings were opened by Meri Larjavaara, the chairperson of the Association and head of the French Language and Literature Department. In her welcoming talk, Larjavaara mentioned that when planning the congress, the organizers had in mind the different ways in which genre and grammar may interact, and so they wanted to attract scholars representing different ways of approaching the problem. Therefore, the conference especially welcomed papers addressing the theme of interfaces between grammar and genre to study how genre affects grammatical choices. The plenary lectures included an opening paper by Maarten Mous (Leiden University) on 'African urban youth speech styles spreading through speech genres', in which he argued that languages change because norms and conventions change and the factors behind the growth of anti-norm youth languages is social. In 'Dialect syntax in a genre', Maria Vilkuna (Institute for the Language of Finland) introduced a recent project on Finnish Dialect Syntax which focuses on areal syntactic microvariation and discussed the applicability of continuous discussion, a type of 'natural' discourse, of real-life topics in syntactic research. Tuija Virtanen-Ulfhielm (Åbo Akademi University) in 'Grammar, discourse type and genre: From text to context and back again' reminded the participants of Professor

Nils Erik Enkvist, her teacher, mentor, colleague, the spiritual father of Åbo Akademi and the best known Finnish linguist internationally, and went on to analyze grammatical variation in the genre of online internet-related chat. The last plenary talk by Anja Wanner



Photo: Professor Tuija Virtanen and dr. Renáta Tomášková in front of Erik Nils Enkvist's portrait.

(University of Wisconsin-Madison) on 'The passive construction as a style and genre marker: Findings, changes, misconceptions' was read, due to the author's last-minute absence, by her 'transatlantic' colleague Heidrun Dorgeloh (Düsseldorf University).

The conference was organized into two parallel sessions, with 27 contributions on topics that accommodated linguistic frameworks focusing on how genre distinctions are reflected in grammar. The symposium brought together linguists from various fields of genre analysis who investigated a variety of institutionalized genres – such as for example circular letters by the Helsinki educational authority (Suvi Honkanen), prologues of classical Greek assembly speeches (Tzu-l Liao), university website presentations (Renáta Tomášková); academic genres: conclusions in Catalan linguistic articles (Hortensia Curell), student matriculation essays (Riita Juvonen, Mikko Virtanen), conference presentations (Gabriela Zapletalová); and mass media genres – discourse of illness in a professional medical journal (Heidrun Dorgeloh), French politicians' blogs (Veronika Laippala, Lotta Lehti), Russian internet blogs (Albina Kunikeeva), Spanish media genres (Miguel A. Aijón Oliva,

María José Serrano) the genre of the public political apology (Eva Norrman), comic and graphic stories (Michael Ewing). Two factors – the narrowly thematic focus of the conference and the relatively small number of papers – meant that the conference not only became an excellent forum for fostering intense interaction among participants in discussion sessions after each contribution, but was also an enjoyable social occasion. Apart from the traditional social meeting-points such as coffee breaks or tasty lunches in a smart university canteen, the social programme also included planned events such as an evening reception at Turku City Hall and a dinner in Svarte Rudolf, a riverboat restaurant located in the centre of Turku near Turku City Theatre, offering a pleasant view of the placid River Aura.

Personally, a memorable experience was meeting the above-mentioned Professor Tuija Virtanen-Ulfhielm, a pupil and disciple of Enkvist, who recounted her teacher's generosity as he seldom missed an opportunity to promote his students and colleagues. Virtanen enthusiastically recalled her experiences with Professor Jan Firbas, Jarmila Tárnyiková, František Daneš and Světa Čmejrková, with whom she was in touch in the early 1990s due to the lively mutual contacts developed mainly by Professor Enkvist, which resulted in a number of reciprocal conferences and publications including *The Syntax of Sentence and Text* (1994) or *Organization in Discourse* (1995).

The conference greatly benefited from its location in the unique Arken building of the Åbo Akademi University, a university exceptional in Finland in that it provides higher education in the Swedish language. The Arken building, where the Faculty of Arts is based, is an exquisitely modernized industrial complex located in a former steel mill once owned by the Armfelt family, who are commemorated in the name of the main auditorium. The conference also gained advantage from Turku itself, which is Finland's oldest city (its history dates back to the 12th century) and the country's first capital. Turku is a pleasant, compact place where most of the important sights are concentrated within walking distance of the banks of the River Aura. Interfaces exist not only between grammar and genre; Turku finds itself on the interface between two politically and socially close, but historically distinct cultures, Finnish and Swedish, which endows the location with a congenial atmosphere.

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