Towards an analysis of book reviews as an academic written genre
Abstract: In the literature on genre scholarship, three major approaches to analyzing genre can be tracked down (cf. Hyon, 1996). The three principal and leading traditions which have dominated the field are based on (1) the seminal work of Systemic Functional Linguists (SFL) such as Halliday (1985a), Ventola (1987), Christie (1989), Hasan (1984, 1989), Martin (1984, 1992, 1993a & b), and Kress (1989, 1993), to name but a few, (2) the leading work of John Swales (1981a & b, 1986, 1990), Dudley-Evans (1986), Flowerdew (1992, 1993), Bhatia (1993), among others, and finally (3) the genre-based new rhetoric studies (see, e.g., Bazerman, 1988; Devitt, 1993; Freedman & Medway, 1994, etc.).

The purpose of the present study was to draw on Swalesian move analytic and Hallidayan Systemic-Functional approaches to genre analysis and introduce a two-tier model or a cross-disciplinary cross-model framework in order to define or systematically characterize Book Reviews (BRs) as an academic written genre at two levels of investigation. More specifically, the purpose of this study was: (1) to identify prototypical generic textual features of BRs that seem to operate both at macro-structural (move analytic) and micro-linguistic (lexico-grammatical) levels, and (2) to investigate whether or not these macro/micro generic features of BRs vary across disciplines (physics, sociology, and literature).

To this end, a corpus of 90 academic BRs from discipline-related research-based professional journals were randomly selected. At two distinct stages, the data were analyzed from the standpoint of two theoretical perspectives: (a) Swalesian move structure and (b) SFL transitivity system. The move analysis of BRs revealed that there seems to exist a discernible macro-move structure basically common across the three disciplines. In plain words, performing similar communicative purposes, BRs seem to carry a generic discipline-neutral macro-move structure whatever the field of inquiry. The move pattern of BRs essentially includes six major moves appearing, in 76.7% of the cases, in the following sequence: (1) an obligatory ‘Introduction’ (100%), (2) an obligatory ‘Description of the Content’ (100%), (3) an obligatory ‘Evaluation’ (100%), (4) an optional ‘Articulation of a Position’ (19%), (5) an optional ‘Demarcation of the Readership’ (35.5%), and finally (6) an optional ‘Recommendation’ (29%).

As for the transitivity system used in BRs to realize moves, however, significant differences were observed in terms of both the type and the frequency of processes and participants. This, it seems, points to a difference in semantic configuration of BRs peculiar to each discipline, though they all seem to fulfill a similar communicative purpose of evaluating knowledge production in the academic milieu. To be more specific, these features point to the fact that BRs in physics journals, as compared to their counterparts in sociology and literature journals, appear to carry a higher percentage of passive construction, non-human concrete participants, and of relational and existential processes, together with a lower percentage of specific human participants; hence, leading to texts significantly loaded up with grammatical metaphor and impersonality.

The findings of this study, it is believed here, can provide English Language Teaching (ELT) materials developers with a theoretically-sound and empirically-valid framework for the development of genre-based second language teaching programs whose objective is to teach reading/writing in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Also, from a theoretical standpoint, the results of the present investigation seem to have cast some new light on the rhetorical and linguistic features of BRs as an academic written genre.