Review Article

REGISTER AND GENRE AS DYNAMIC SYSTEMS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH

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Abstract

Register and genre are central concepts for explaining how language varies with situation and purpose, yet they are studied in separate traditions, including systemic functional linguistics, genre analysis, corpus linguistics, clinical discourse research and natural language processing, which rarely inform one another. The rapid growth of digital texts and large language models has made the question of how linguistic variation is organised newly urgent. This narrative review aimed to synthesise recent research on register and genre across these traditions and to examine what it suggests about the relationship between linguistic variation, meaning-making and language processing. Foundational works and recent empirical studies, mainly published between 2015 and 2025, were identified through searches of Google Scholar, DOAJ and the ACL Anthology and synthesised thematically. Three themes emerged. First, registers are identified by co-occurring lexical and grammatical features that vary along a continuum rather than by fixed rules, and readers' and listeners' expectations about genre shape how texts are processed. Second, genre functions as a framework for organising meaning, and explicit genre-based instruction consistently supports learners' writing development. Third, register and genre are increasingly applied beyond linguistics: discourse genre affects the language produced by speakers with and without aphasia, register and genre classification structures large web corpora, and register-based analyses reveal systematic differences between human and machine-generated texts. The review concludes that register and genre are best understood as flexible, usage-based systems that link linguistic form to social purpose. It also cautions that claims about their cognitive basis still rest on limited direct evidence and on research dominated by English.

Keywords: *Genre; Genre-based pedagogy; Language variation; Narrative review; Register*

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INTRODUCTION

Language varies systematically with the situations in which it is used and the purposes it serves. A conversation between friends, a lecture, a news report and a research

article differ not only in topic but also in their vocabulary, grammar and organisation. Two concepts have been central to explaining this variation. Register refers to the variety of language associated with a situation of use, characterised by the lexical and grammatical features that are functionally suited to that situation (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Genre refers to a recognisable type of text or communicative event that achieves a social purpose through a conventional structure, such as a job application, a research article or a narrative (Martin & Rose, 2008; Swales, 1990). Although the two concepts are closely related, they have been defined in different and sometimes conflicting ways (Lee, 2001).

Interest in register and genre has grown in recent years for several reasons. The internet has produced vast collections of texts whose registers and genres are mixed, new or unclear, creating challenges for corpus construction and text classification (Egbert et al., 2015; Myntti et al., 2024). Genre-based approaches have become widespread in language education, particularly in writing instruction (Aulia, 2024; Liardet et al., 2026). Research on discourse in clinical populations has shown that the type of discourse elicited affects the language that speakers produce (Stark, 2019). Most recently, large language models have raised new questions about whether machine-generated texts reproduce the register variation found in human writing (Herbold et al., 2023; Reinhart et al., 2025).

These developments have taken place in separate research traditions, including systemic functional linguistics, genre analysis, corpus-based register studies, clinical discourse research and natural language processing, which often use different definitions, methods and terminology. As a result, there are few accounts that bring together what these traditions reveal about register and genre as a whole. In particular, claims that register and genre reflect how people process and organise meaning are often made in general terms, without a clear view of the evidence on which they rest. A synthesis across traditions can clarify the shared insights and the remaining gaps.

This article therefore reviews recent research on register and genre across these traditions. It focuses on three themes: the relationship between linguistic structure, register variation and processing; genre as a framework for meaning-making and learning; and the application of register and genre in education, clinical research and computational linguistics. It addresses the following questions:

RQ1. How are register and genre conceptualised and distinguished in current linguistic research?

RQ2. What does recent research reveal about register and genre in relation to linguistic structure, meaning-making and language processing?

RQ3. How are register and genre applied in education, clinical research and computational linguistics, and what gaps remain?

METHOD

Design. This study is a narrative literature review. A narrative review is appropriate when the aim is to synthesise knowledge across different research traditions and to develop a conceptual overview, rather than to estimate the size of an effect or to answer a narrowly defined question (Snyder, 2019). Because the relevant literature spans theoretical linguistics, applied linguistics, clinical research and natural language processing, with very different designs and outcome measures, a narrative and thematic synthesis was considered more appropriate than a systematic review or meta-analysis.

Sources. Two kinds of sources were reviewed. The first were foundational works that define register and genre and their relationship (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Hyland, 2004; Lee, 2001; Martin & Rose, 2008; Swales, 1990). The second were empirical studies and reviews, mainly published between 2015 and 2025, identified through searches of Google Scholar, the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and the ACL Anthology using combinations of the keywords *register*, *genre*, *register variation*, *genre-based approach*, *discourse type*, *web registers* and *language models*. Studies were selected purposively if they were published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings, examined register or genre explicitly, and contributed evidence to at least one of the three themes. Opinion pieces and sources whose bibliographic details could not be verified were excluded.

Analysis. The selected studies were read closely, and their focus, data, methods and main findings were recorded. The findings were then grouped thematically under the three themes and compared across traditions to identify points of agreement, tension and gaps. Because the review is narrative, the selection of studies is illustrative rather than exhaustive, and no claims are made about the frequency of findings in the literature as a whole.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualising Register and Genre

The concept of register has its roots in systemic functional linguistics. Halliday and Hasan (1989) related register to three dimensions of the context of situation: field (what is happening), tenor (who is taking part and their relationships) and mode (the role played by language, such as spoken or written). Changes in these contextual variables are reflected in predictable changes in language. Biber and Conrad (2019) developed a corpus-based approach in which a register is defined by its situational characteristics and analysed through the pervasive lexical and grammatical features that occur frequently in it because they serve its communicative functions. In this view, register features are not fixed rules but statistical tendencies: a feature such as the passive voice is more frequent in scientific writing because it suits the purposes of that register.

The concept of genre has developed in several traditions. In English for Specific Purposes, Swales (1990) defined genres as classes of communicative events that share communicative purposes and are recognised by members of a discourse community, and he analysed their structure in terms of rhetorical moves. In the Sydney School of systemic functional linguistics, genres are defined as staged, goal-oriented social processes, such as recounts, explanations and arguments, that are realised through particular configurations of register (Martin & Rose, 2008). Hyland (2004) emphasised the social and pedagogical value of genre, arguing that making genre conventions explicit helps second language writers to participate in academic and professional communities.

Lee (2001) observed that the terms register, genre, text type and style are used inconsistently and proposed a practical distinction: genre categorises texts on the basis of external criteria such as purpose and audience, while register describes the internal linguistic characteristics associated with situations of use. Biber and Conrad (2019) similarly distinguish the register perspective, which focuses on pervasive linguistic features, from the genre perspective, which focuses on conventional structures that typically occur once in a complete text, such as the opening and closing of a letter. Table 1 summarises these differences. The two perspectives are complementary: the same text can be analysed both as an instance of a genre and in terms of its register features.

Table 1. Register and genre perspectives on language variation

Dimension	Register perspective	Genre perspective
Main question	Which linguistic features are typical of a situation of use?	How is a text structured to achieve its social purpose?
Unit of analysis	Text excerpts or whole texts as samples of a variety	Complete texts or communicative events
Linguistic focus	Pervasive lexical and grammatical features	Conventional stages, moves and their realisation
Explanation	Features are functionally suited to the situation (field, tenor, mode)	Structures are shaped by community conventions and purposes
Typical methods	Corpus-based and multidimensional analysis	Move analysis, SFL genre analysis, ethnography
Key sources	Biber and Conrad (2019); Halliday and Hasan (1989)	Swales (1990); Martin and Rose (2008); Hyland (2004)

Note. Compiled from Biber and Conrad (2019) and Lee (2001).

Theme 1: Linguistic Structure, Register Variation and Processing

Corpus-based research shows that registers can be identified reliably from their linguistic features, but that these features form patterns of co-occurrence rather than discrete rules. Laippala et al. (2021) analysed an unrestricted corpus of English web documents and found that combining lexical and grammatical features allowed registers to be identified with competitive accuracy, while grammatical information made the models more stable. They also found that registers vary along a continuum in how far their identification depends on vocabulary or on grammar. This supports the view that registers are probabilistic configurations of features, consistent with Biber and Conrad's (2019) functional account.

The probabilistic view of register has its foundation in multidimensional analysis. Biber (1988) analysed the co-occurrence of sixty-seven linguistic features across spoken and written registers of English and found that they cluster along several underlying dimensions, such as involved versus informational production and narrative versus non-narrative concerns. Registers differ in their positions on these dimensions rather than in the presence or absence of individual features. Conversation, for example, combines many features of involvement, such as first- and second-person pronouns, contractions and present-tense verbs, while academic prose combines features of informational density, such as nouns, attributive adjectives and prepositional phrases. This framework explains why register differences are gradual and why a single text can share features with several registers. It also provides the analytical basis for later work on web registers and on machine-generated text (Laippala et al., 2021; Reinhart et al., 2025).

Research on web texts also shows that register categories are not always clear-cut. Egbert et al. (2015) developed a bottom-up method in which ordinary internet users classified web documents by their situational characteristics, and they found that many documents were hybrids that combined features of several registers. Myntti et al. (2024) applied separate register and genre classifiers to a large web-crawled corpus and found expected overlaps, such as lyrical texts falling mainly under literature and fiction, but also registers such as interactive discussion that spread across many genres depending on their subject. These findings indicate that register and genre are related but independent dimensions and that digital communication produces combinations that do not fit traditional categories.

Evidence on how register and genre relate to processing is more limited and comes mainly from studies of comprehension and production. In a classic experiment, Zwaan (1994) showed that readers who believed they were reading a literary story remembered the surface form of the text better, while those who believed they were reading a news report built stronger representations of the situation described. Genre expectations thus influenced how the same text was processed. Stark (2019) found that the type of discourse elicited, whether narrative, procedural or picture description, affected most linguistic measures in both speakers with aphasia and age-matched controls: narrative discourse produced the highest propositional density, while procedural discourse produced the least syntactically complex language. Together, these studies show that genre shapes both how texts are understood and how speakers organise their own language, although direct neurocognitive evidence on register and genre remains scarce.

Theme 2: Genre as a Framework for Meaning-Making and Learning

Genre theory proposes that genres are not only text types but also frameworks through which speakers and writers organise meaning to achieve social purposes (Martin & Rose, 2008; Swales, 1990). From this perspective, learning a genre means learning how a community structures knowledge and action through language, and making genre conventions explicit can give learners access to forms of meaning-making that might otherwise remain hidden (Hyland, 2004).

In the Sydney School, this view has been translated into an explicit pedagogy. Rose and Martin (2012) describe a teaching and learning cycle in which teachers first build learners' knowledge of the field, then deconstruct model texts to show how their stages and language achieve their purposes, then construct a new text jointly with the class, and finally support learners as they write independently. The cycle reflects the assumption that genres

are learned most effectively when their structure and register features are made visible and when learners are guided from shared to independent performance. It also connects genre with register, because each stage of a genre is realised through particular choices of vocabulary and grammar that learners must master.

Research on genre-based pedagogy supports this view. Thongchalerm and Jarunthawatchai (2020) implemented a genre-based teaching cycle of modelling, joint construction and independent construction in a twelve-week news report writing course with 44 Thai English majors. Students improved significantly on a test of the linguistic features of the genre and reported positive attitudes towards explicit and collaborative learning, although one student felt that the model text constrained personal style. At the level of synthesis, Aulia (2024) reviewed fifteen studies of genre-based instruction in EFL writing from nine countries and found that most reported better writing performance or higher scores, together with more positive attitudes. Liardet et al. (2026) reviewed seventy studies of the SFL genre-based approach in university English for Academic Purposes classrooms in twenty countries, mapping their designs, disciplinary contexts and genre focus and identifying directions for further research.

These studies suggest that genre knowledge supports learners' ability to organise and express meaning, particularly in writing. At the same time, the evidence comes largely from short interventions with single groups and from self-reports, and the risk noted by Thongchalerm and Jarunthawatchai (2020), that models may constrain learners' voice, points to the need to teach genres as flexible resources rather than fixed templates.

Theme 3: Register and Genre in Applied Domains

Clinical research. The finding that discourse genre affects language production has practical consequences for clinical assessment. Stark (2019) showed that measures of the language of people with aphasia depend heavily on the type of discourse elicited and recommended using several discourse types to obtain a representative picture of a speaker's abilities. Awareness of genre differences thus improves the validity of clinical language assessment and may inform the design of rehabilitation tasks.

Computational linguistics. Register and genre have become important in natural language processing because text classification, corpus construction and language generation all depend on knowing what kind of text is being processed. Classifiers trained on manually annotated corpora can now identify the registers and genres of web texts with moderate accuracy (Laippala et al., 2021; Myntti et al., 2024). Related research on evaluative language

shows that dimensions of meaning traditionally studied in discourse analysis, such as the appraisal of events, can be annotated and predicted in text (Troiano et al., 2023).

Register-based methods have also been used to examine machine-generated text. Herbold et al. (2023) compared human-written and ChatGPT-generated argumentative essays and found that the AI-generated essays were rated higher in quality by teachers but differed from human essays in their linguistic characteristics. Reinhart et al. (2025) used Biber's lexical, grammatical and rhetorical features to compare texts written by humans and by several large language models responding to the same prompts. They found systematic differences between humans and models, and among the models themselves, with instruction-tuned models diverging more from human writing than base models. These studies show that register analysis provides a sensitive tool for describing how machine-generated language differs from human language, and that matching human register variation remains a challenge for language models. Table 2 summarises the recent empirical studies discussed in this review.

Table 2. Recent empirical studies on register and genre reviewed in this article

Study	Domain	Data and method	Main finding
Egbert et al. (2015)	Corpus linguistics	Web documents classified by users; situational characteristics	Many web documents are register hybrids
Stark (2019)	Clinical discourse	Three discourse tasks; speakers with aphasia and controls	Discourse type affects most linguistic measures
Thongchalerm and Jarunthawatchai (2020)	Education	Genre-based instruction; 44 EFL students; tests and interviews	Significant gains in genre-specific linguistic features
Laippala et al. (2021)	Corpus linguistics / NLP	Unrestricted web corpus; lexical and grammatical features	Registers identifiable; grammar adds stability
Herbold et al. (2023)	Education / NLP	Human vs. ChatGPT argumentative essays; teacher ratings	AI essays rated higher but differ linguistically
Troiano et al. (2023)	NLP / discourse	Text corpus annotated for appraisal dimensions of emotion	Appraisal dimensions can be annotated and predicted
Aulia (2024)	Education	Systematic review of 15 genre-based studies	Most report improved writing performance

Myntti et al. (2024)	NLP / digital humanities	Register and genre classifiers on web-crawled corpus	Register and genre overlap but are independent
Reinhart et al. (2025)	NLP / register studies	Human vs. LLM texts; Biber's features	Systematic stylistic differences, larger for instruction-tuned models
Liardet et al. (2026)	Education	Systematic review of 70 SFL genre-based EAP studies	Maps designs, contexts and gaps in research

Discussion

The first research question concerned how register and genre are conceptualised. The review shows broad agreement that register refers to situationally motivated patterns of linguistic features, while genre refers to conventional ways of structuring texts to achieve social purposes (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Lee, 2001; Martin & Rose, 2008). The traditions differ in emphasis rather than in substance, and recent computational work treating register and genre as separate but intersecting dimensions (Myntti et al., 2024) confirms that the two concepts capture different aspects of variation that need to be analysed together.

The second research question concerned what recent research reveals about register and genre in relation to structure, meaning-making and processing. Across traditions, the evidence points to a common conclusion: register and genre are flexible, usage-based systems rather than fixed sets of rules. Registers are identified by co-occurring features that vary along continua (Laippala et al., 2021), web texts often combine registers (Egbert et al., 2015), and genres are learned as frameworks for organising meaning (Thongchalerm & Jarunthawatchai, 2020). There is also evidence that genre expectations shape comprehension (Zwaan, 1994) and that discourse genre shapes production (Stark, 2019). However, the claim that register and genre directly reflect cognitive structures should be made with caution. Most of the evidence reviewed here is linguistic or behavioural rather than neurocognitive, and few studies have tested cognitive explanations directly.

The third research question concerned applications and gaps. Register and genre have proved useful in education, clinical assessment and computational linguistics, and register analysis has become a valuable tool for describing machine-generated text (Herbold et al., 2023; Reinhart et al., 2025). At the same time, three gaps stand out. First, most of the research reviewed, including the computational studies, is based on English, so it is unclear how far the findings apply to other languages and cultures, including Indonesian. Second, the traditions use different methods and categories, which makes their findings difficult to

compare and calls for shared frameworks that combine corpus-based register analysis with genre analysis. Third, the cognitive dimension of register and genre remains under-researched, and experimental and neurocognitive studies are needed to test claims about how register and genre knowledge are represented and used.

A practical way of addressing the methodological fragmentation identified above is to combine the two perspectives within the same study. A genre analysis can identify the stages or moves of a set of texts, and a register analysis can then examine which lexical and grammatical features characterise each stage, using corpus methods to test whether the features are distinctive. Computational studies already treat register and genre as separate but intersecting labels (Myntti et al., 2024), and educational studies already teach genre stages together with the language features that realise them (Rose & Martin, 2012; Thongchalerm & Jarunthawatchai, 2020). Bringing these approaches together in descriptive research would make findings more comparable across traditions and would provide richer descriptions for teaching and for evaluating machine-generated text. Such integration would also make it easier to test cognitive claims, because researchers could examine whether readers and writers are sensitive to genre stages, to register features, or to both.

These findings have practical implications. For language teachers, the review supports explicit genre-based instruction combined with attention to the register features that realise each genre, taught as flexible resources rather than fixed templates. For clinicians, it supports the use of multiple discourse genres in language assessment. For developers and researchers working with language technologies, it suggests that register and genre provide useful dimensions for evaluating whether machine-generated text matches the variation found in human communication. For Indonesian applied linguistics, it points to the need for register and genre research on Indonesian and regional languages and on the English used by Indonesian learners.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review synthesised research on register and genre across systemic functional linguistics, genre analysis, corpus linguistics, clinical discourse research and natural language processing. Register and genre are best understood as complementary perspectives on language variation: register captures the linguistic features associated with situations of use, while genre captures the conventional structures through which texts achieve social purposes. Recent research shows that both are flexible, usage-based systems,

that genre expectations and discourse genres shape comprehension and production, that explicit genre knowledge supports learners' writing, and that register and genre analysis have valuable applications in clinical assessment and in the study of machine-generated text.

The review also shows that claims about the cognitive basis of register and genre rest on limited direct evidence and that the field is dominated by research on English. The review is limited by its narrative design and by its purposive selection of studies, which is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Future research should examine register and genre in languages other than English, including Indonesian, combine corpus-based and genre-based methods in shared frameworks, and test cognitive explanations through experimental and neurocognitive studies. A systematic review following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) could build on this synthesis by mapping the literature more comprehensively.

AI USE AND DISCLOSURE

Generative AI (Claude, Anthropic) was used to restructure the manuscript as a narrative review, edit the language, verify references and format the article according to the journal template. The authors reviewed and verified all content and take full responsibility for the article. Please confirm or revise this statement.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND INFORMED CONSENT

This study is a literature review based solely on published sources and did not involve human participants; ethical approval and informed consent were therefore not required.

CRediT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Roy Justine: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

Loensky Fardiansyah: Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft.

Refika Andriani: Supervision, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY

No new data were generated or analysed in this study. All sources reviewed are listed in the references.

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