Chapter 20
Text Transformation: The Art of Parody

Elisabeth Müller-Lipold

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20.1 Contextualisation

In the two Language in Use (LIU) classes offered at the Department of English and American Studies, students are sensitised to, and encouraged to experiment with, various aspects and procedures of writing, which raises their general awareness of language and develops their appreciation of texts (see Schwarz-Peaker, this volume). They also improve their ability to determine connotative and figurative meanings of words and phrases and to distinguish between multiple meanings. In LIU 1, students focus more on text analyses, while in LIU 2, they are required to do both text analyses and text transformations. However, as being able to analyse a text is prerequisite for being able to transform it, the two skills are intertwined and complement each other (Paltridge, 1996, p. 235). Therefore, in both LIU 1 and 2, we study a huge variety of genres and text types – stories, e-mails, newspaper articles, book reviews, poems, proverbs, and many more.

In "Worlds of genre – metaphors of genre," Swales (2009, p. 6) quotes Bazerman (1997), who says that genres are "ways of being," and "frames for social action" that "shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact" (p. 19). Indeed, genres often depend on their communicative purpose, which usually evolves over time, and are thus subject to change. However, it is important to differentiate genre from text type (Paltridge, 1996, p. 237). Paltridge argues that this distinction is an important one for the language learner as the two terms provide different perspectives on a text: while 'genre' refers to pre-defined categories such as those

E. Müller-Lipold (✉)
Department of English and American Studies, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria
e-mail: elisabeth.mueller-lipold@univie.ac.at

mentioned above (e.g., blogs or recipes), 'text type' denotes texts grouped according to the rhetorical patterns that they have in common. However, Paltridge (1996, p. 237) deplores the fact that the notions of genre and text type are often blurred in the classroom application of 'genre analysis,' and that some structural elements of texts can thus easily be disguised if students only learn about either one. In fact, a single genre can incorporate more than one text type; for example, a poem may include both persuasive and evaluative patterns. On the other hand, different genres often share the same text type: both a TV commercial and a student assignment may be descriptive (Paltridge, 1996, p. 239). Considering this aspect in the language classroom is important as it clearly informs not only the analyses that students are required to do but also their text transformations. Indeed, their task may be to change one genre category to another, taking into account both changes in generic structure and in text structure.

Students especially enjoy the creative and more inventive procedures of text transformation, although, of course, they may never have to write a limerick or an epitaph in 'real life.' Still, the combination of first analysing and then transforming texts makes sound sense as the realisation of *how* and *why* certain changes affect, for example, the tone, purpose or genre of a text is a skill that students will keep using (Grellet, 1996, p. 59; Newman, 2017). Similarly, Caudery (1998) stresses the relevance of making students aware of genre, and how this awareness can be translated into effective writing. Especially, he states that, "for improving general writing skills, teaching general principles on how genre-related factors relate to the internal features of a text is likely to be more effective than teaching specific features associated with individual genres," and that students need to be exposed to a wide variety of genres to be able to appreciate the differences. In fact, we as teachers should not unnecessarily restrict the range and complexity of the texts we ask students to read. Rather, we should encourage them to go beyond the usual genres to be able to identify, and appreciate, the boundaries of specific ones (Caudery, 1998).

One task that is highly appreciated by LIU 2 students is parodying. Parody, its name deriving from Greek *parodia* (i.e., a mocking version of an epic), is "a composition in which the characteristic turns of thought and phrase of an author are mimicked and made to appear ridiculous, especially by applying them to ludicrously inappropriate subjects" (Dear, 1985, p. 521). Parody comes in an abundance of variations and types of artistic medium, from Friedrich Gulda's Cello Concerto (1980) to Benny Hill's song "Ernie (The Fastest Milkman in the West)" (1971), from the Ancient Greek satyr plays to Mel Brooks' "Men in Tights" (1993). Another example, which I also use in class, is "The Onion" (n.d.), a well-known fake-news website that twists everyday occurrences into hugely funny and at times grotesque opposites, usually employing the strategy of exaggeration. Indeed, parody uses a range of different, sometimes overlapping, techniques. Often, humour is based on inversion or trivialisation, as it reverses commonly accepted values: the parodist distorts a serious or a trivial aspect in order to entertain or shock (Crystal, 1995, p. 404).

20.2   Objectives

Both LIU courses aim to familiarise students with a variety of text types and genres (see Schwarz-Peaker, this volume). Students learn to identify characteristic features of each such genre or text type. They become aware of the way in which texts and other discourses can be used, for example to explain, inform, or persuade, and what effects can be achieved thus. Moreover, students learn to recognise how an author's structural, lexical, and grammatical choices influence the tone of a text. These insights are expected to have a positive influence on the students' own writing and speaking skills. Using the analytic grid provided (see Appendix 1), students are required to contextualise the respective text, and to find out how and why the author has used distinctive features. They first identify and describe such features, giving concrete examples, and then comment on and evaluate the effects achieved.

In this specific case, students learn to recognise the literary devices of parody, satire, and irony in pieces of writing, and to create such a text themselves. In addition, they need to keep in mind the notion of context, that is, the "particular circumstances surrounding the way the text is produced and received," as the writer's intention could have been quite different from the reader's interpretation of the text (Beard, 2003, p. 26). According to Carter and Goddard (2016), every writer creates a sort of "narrative voice" to address a specific "implied" readership, a fact which one has to be aware of when analysing a text. Guided by the features of an original work, students are then encouraged to provide humorously or ironically exaggerated imitations or even complete distortions of the author's style, or of the genre itself. In doing so, they need to pay careful attention to detail, thus acquiring an in-depth knowledge of the textual and linguistic features of various genres. Indeed, such activity usually proves to be highly stimulating and motivating as students develop their own writing styles in the process.

20.3   Procedure

In the course of my LIU 2 classes, I have had my students produce parodies of a wide variety of genres; as an example, I have decided to provide a lesson parodying love poems, which spanned two sessions (via Moodle, the university's e-learning platform, students were given the assignment of finding and analysing a poem; in Session 1, they received my feedback on their choices; in Session 2, they did the text transformations). Session 2 consisted of the following four steps:

Step 1 included the preparatory activities of selecting and analysing a poem. Having discussed the aspects of parody with my students at length, and having analysed several examples in detail, I divided the class into pairs using the online platform Moodle and had them find a love poem, such as a sonnet, of at least twelve lines as a homework assignment (either on the internet or in the library), and analyse the poem of their choice according to the grids provided (see "Framework for

Analysing Texts" and "Approaching Texts – A Checklist for Language in Use," Appendices 1 and 2). In this analysis, students first established a hypothesis about categories such as the author's intended readership and purpose, then selecting examples of lexical, grammatical, and structural features from the text to support their choices.

One pair chose Sonnet XLIII by Elizabeth Barret Browning (1844/2015), which will serve to illustrate the procedure:

> How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
> I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
> My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
> For the ends of being and ideal grace.
> I love thee to the level of every day's
> Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
> I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
> I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
> I love thee with the passion put to use
> In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
> I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
> With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
> Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
> I shall but love thee better after death.

Prior to the next stage, the pairs had to submit their poem and analysis for my approval and feedback, which I provided individually in the following session.

Step 2 was the actual transformation task, which students did in pairs in class (45 minutes). In LIU, the analysis of a text is intended to prepare students for its transformation, here for parody: what would have to be changed or adapted to make the love poem appropriate, that is, funny or ludicrous, for a different readership, purpose, or time? How would changing the genre affect this purpose? Which lexico-grammatical features would have to be different? In Session 2 of the procedure, students were asked to parody the poem by changing either merely its wording and/or structure or the genre itself; they were also informed that they were expected to explain and justify their choices vis-á-vis their classmates and myself. Otherwise, I gave them free rein in this phase of the activity so as not to curb their creativity. However, while they were working, I moved from pair to pair and provided some assistance, mainly suggesting some lexical changes and making sure that they were able to cope.

Again, students made very different choices. Some turned their poem into an e-mail or cooking recipe, while others stayed within the genre of poetry but gave theirs a completely different gist and direction, for example using modern language and idioms. One pair even transformed a Shakespearean sonnet into a modern-day hip-hop song and performed it in class.

After contextualising and analysing the poem especially with regard to its archaic lexis and special structure, the pair with the sonnet by Elizabeth Barret Browning chose to turn it into a hate poem, in a style reminiscent of gothic poetry. This

fourteen-line Petrarchan sonnet, with its traditional rhyme scheme (ABBAABBA CDCDCD) and iambic pentameter (Dear, 1985, p. 524), proved a very good choice as its love theme lent itself to being twisted and ridiculed. However, in the preceding analysis, for which they had used the grid provided, the students took note of the fact that the special form they had chosen would strongly influence and restrict their transformation. As Lennard (2005, p. 33) notes, every poetic form prescribes aspects such as structure, punctuation, rhyme, and tone, and it has become associated with a certain content, such as love. In order to achieve the parodic effect required, the students decided not completely to adhere to the rhyme scheme of the original sonnet but rather to make several lexical and structural changes. This also ties in with Crystal's claim that parody must not be a complete, consistent imitation of an original poem but that it must contain "a designed imperfection" (Crystal, 1995, p. 404). The result of the pair's effort was the following:

> How do I hate thee? There are endless ways.
> I despise thee to the depth and breadth and height
> My soul can reach, when darkness gives me fright
> For this will surely end my infernal grace.
> I hate thee to the level of every day's
> Most evil thoughts, of death and torturing.
> I hate thee compulsively, as men kill men.
> I hate thee strongly, as they gloat and cheer.
> I hate thee with a passion put to use
> In my old griefs, and with my unjust reasoning.
> I despise thee with a hate I would not lose
> As I've lost my saints. I despise thee with the breath,
> Rage, tears, of all my life; and if mercy choose,
>
> I shall but cease to hate thee after death.

Although they had not quite kept to the Petrarchan rhyme scheme (lines 6, 8, 10), the two students had quite successfully captured the tone of the original work both lexically (e.g., *thee*, *but*, *infernal*) and structurally (by retaining, e.g., the parallel, even anaphoric structure *I hate thee* and some of the parataxis of the original, as well as the enjambment, where the syntax continues into the next line, e.g., lines 2/3) but managed to give it a completely different tone. The humorous, or rather ironical, effect was achieved through the ludicrous twist to what was originally a love poem.

In the ensuing 30-minute peer feedback phase, which constituted Step 3, students were asked to give and receive detailed feedback. For this purpose, they formed small groups of four (consisting of two pairs each) and swapped both the original sonnets and their parodies, to analyse them in a similar manner as they had done their own original texts in the preparatory phase, focusing, however, mainly on lexical and generic choices. This took them approximately 10 minutes. Then, they exchanged their feedback on the respective other pair's parody in the groups assigned.

The final step, Step 4, consisted of class feedback and took 45 minutes. We discussed what everybody had discovered in both the pair and the group work sessions. Given a time frame of 10 minutes each, every group of four first presented their feedback sessions and projected the respective texts onto the wall. Then, everyone was invited to join the discussion and to share their ideas. Finally, each group was asked to upload the results of their work onto our Moodle platform as a final assignment.

20.4   Evaluation

The combination of guided (i.e., the analysis) and independent activity (i.e., the parody) proved highly effective as "students become more aware of writing as a process of problem solving" and realise "that choice of language and text organisation to communicate their message depends to a large extent on audience, communicative purpose and generic convention" (Caudery, 1998). Students also appreciated that I merely acted as facilitator since this gave them sufficient space for their own creativity. The fact that they were then entrusted with another pair's parody to evaluate the lexical, stylistic, and/or generic choices made, and to exchange individual feedback, served to raise general learner autonomy and responsibility. Indeed, often merely reading somebody else's work of a similar nature serves to give a learner a new understanding of the task at hand and the variety of possible 'solutions' (Caudery, 1998). In the final in-class feedback round, all students confirmed that they had found the task highly engaging as it had sparked their interest and participation, and that they appreciated the fact that I had left them so much freedom in their choices. They had learnt about the way that language works in achieving certain effects – here humour and parody – and how small changes can make a huge difference in terms of meaning and reception. My students also stressed that not only had they learnt new vocabulary, but they had also gained a deeper insight into the workings and intricacies of language in general, and of poetry in particular – which, after all, had been one of the central objectives of the task.

Appendices

Appendix 1

A Framework for Analysing a Text

Description of features	Choices made for features (examples)	Justification of choices
Genre/text type		
Structure		
Audience/ relationship to audience		
Purpose		
Vocabulary		
Grammar		

Appendix 2

Approaching Texts – A Checklist for Language in Use

TEXT IN ITS CONTEXT ('Top-down' approach)	TEXTUAL FEATURES ('Bottom-up' approach)
WHO is talking with whom? • Addresser • Addressee • Relationship between them • Social group • Gender • Age **WHERE** was it produced? • Area: e.g., region, culture, language variety • Mode (of discourse): spoken - written • Medium: radio, TV, newspaper, etc. • Situation: e.g., formal – informal, public – private **WHICH** text type does belong to? • Text type (genre): e.g., recipe, business letter **WHAT** is it about? • Subject matter **WHEN** was it produced? • Time **WHY** was it produced? • Purpose, function: e.g., to persuade, inform, explain, amuse, instruct, please **HOW** does the text try to achieve its purpose? (= rhetorical effects, see also Text column) • Intertextuality (=reference to other texts)	**LEXIS (word choice)** • Core or non-core? • Formal vs. informal (Romance/Latinate – Germanic, long – short, mono–/polysyllabic, simple – complex) • Archaic, obsolete, rare, dialect words vs. colloquial, common, everyday words • Features of spoken language: (e.g., discourse particles/fillers, interjections) • Literal – figurative, plain – metaphorical, concrete – abstract • Field-specific or 'technical' vocabulary (e.g., chemistry, religion, advertising); jargon; acronyms • Are collocational restrictions broken? (familiar – unfamiliar collocations) Word class? • Preponderance of ADJs & ADVs (suggesting a descriptive or evaluative text) • Many nouns (a possible sign of high lexical density) • Pronouns (e.g., direct addressing of *you*, expressive *I*, impersonal *it*, inclusive/exclusive *we*, lack of 1st & second person pronouns in impersonal texts) **GRAMMAR** • Tense & aspect: e.g., simple present tense suggests generalisation (e.g., informational texts); past tense is used in narratives • Passive voice (may be used for its impersonal effect) • Modal auxiliaries: express modality (e.g., certainty, obligation), politeness • Lightly – heavily modified nouns (pre- or postmodified) • Pronouns • Heavily adjectival/adverbial or mainly nouns/ verbs? • Long – short sentences • Sentence types: simple (just main clause), complex (subordination), compound (coordination) • Repetition, parallelism of structures • 'Marked' structures (e.g., inversion, clefts, dislocation) • Direct – indirect speech • Ellipsis, sentence fragments **STRUCTURE & ORGANISATION** A cohesive text? (are there formal links between sentences?) • Lexical chains/sets (same semantic field)

• Allusion • Juxtaposition • Irony • Metaphor & simile	• Phrasal verbs (typical of informal, spoken language) Neutral or 'loaded'? (denotation vs. connotation) • Biased, emotive lexis • Vogue/'buzz' words, euphemism • Slang, swearing, taboo words, innuendo • Superlatives, hyperbole (e.g., advertising) • 'Modal' words: e.g., attitudinal adverbs (*unfortunately*, *perhaps*), intensifiers, hedges/downtoners **VISUAL PRESENTATION & AURAL EFFECT** • Layout & visual presentation • Charts, tables, graphs... • Spelling & punctuation • Alliteration, repetition of sounds, rhyme & rhythm	• Linking words (conjunctions) • Pronouns, reference • Parallelism, repetition • Information structure: given – new A coherent text? (are the meanings of sentences / utterances linked? e.g., by way of inference, by our knowledge of the world, i.e., does it make sense?) Textual development? • General –specific, chronological, frames... • Enumeration, exemplification, comparison, contrast... • Paragraphing (topic sentences) • Identification of moves (= communicative function of passages, e.g., introduction) • Turn taking structure (in spoken texts) • Theme/topic – rheme

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