Mikhail Bakhtin, Excerpt from “The Problem of Speech Genres”  
[Bakhtin, M. Speech Genres & Other Late Essays, (trans. by Vern W. McGee). Austin, TX:  
University of Texas Press, 1986, pp. 60-63.]

All the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language. Quite  
understandably, the nature and forms of this use are just as diverse as are the areas of human  
activity. … Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written)  
by participants in the various areas of human activity. These utterances reflect the specific  
conditions and goals of each such area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic  
style, that is, the selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of the  
language, but above all through their compositional structure. All three of these aspects-  
thematic content, style, and compositional structure-are inseparably linked to the whole of the  
utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of  
communication. Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which  
language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may  
call speech genres.

The wealth and diversity of speech genres are boundless because the various  
possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible, and because each sphere of activity contains  
an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere  
develops and becomes more complex. Special emphasis should be placed on the extreme  
heterogeneity of speech genres (oral and written). In fact, the category of speech genres should  
include short rejoinders of daily dialogue (and these are extremely varied depending on the  
subject matter, situation, and participants), everyday narration, writing (in all its various forms),  
the brief standard military command, the elaborate and detailed order, the fairly variegated  
repertoire of business documents (for the most part standard), and the diverse world of  
commentary (in the broad sense of the word: social, political).

And we must also include here the diverse forms of scientific statements and all literary  
genres (from the proverb to the multivolume novel). It might seem that speech genres are so  
heterogeneous that they do not have and cannot have a single common level at which they can  
be studied. For here, on one level of inquiry, appear such heterogeneous phenomena as the  
single-word everyday rejoinder and the multivolume novel, the military command that is  
standardized even in its intonation and the profoundly individual lyrical work, and so on. One  
might think that such functional heterogeneity makes the common features of speech genres  
excessively abstract and empty. This probably explains why the general problem of speech  
genres has never really been raised. Literary genres have been studied more than anything  
ext else. But from antiquity to the present, they have been studied in terms of their specific literary  
and artistic features … and not as specific types of utterances distinct from other types … .  
Rhetorical genres have been studied since antiquity (and not much has been added in  
subsequent epochs to classical theory). But here, too, the specific features of rhetorical genres  
(judicial, political) still overshadowed their general linguistic nature. Finally, everyday speech  
genres have been studied (mainly rejoinders in everyday dialogue), and from a general linguistic  
standpoint….
The extreme heterogeneity of speech genres and the attendant difficulty of determining the general nature of the utterance should in no way be underestimated. It is especially important here to draw attention to the very significant difference between primary (simple) and secondary (complex) speech genres (understood not as a functional difference). Secondary (complex) speech genres—novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary, and so forth-arise in more complex and comparatively highly developed and organized cultural communication (primarily written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on. During the process of their formation, they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communion. These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones. They lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others. For example, rejoinders of everyday dialogue or letters found in a novel retain their form and their everyday significance only on the plane of the novel’s content. They enter into actual reality only via the novel as a whole, that is, as a literary-artistic event and not as everyday life. The novel as a whole is an utterance just as rejoinders in everyday dialogue or private letters are (they do have a common nature), but unlike these, the novel is a secondary (complex) utterance.

The difference between primary and secondary (ideological) genres is very great and fundamental, but this is precisely why the nature of the utterance should be revealed and defined through analysis of both types. The very interrelations between primary and secondary genres and the process of the historical formation of the latter shed light on the nature of the utterance (and above all on the complex problem of the interrelations among language, ideology, and world view).

A study of the nature of the utterance and of the diversity of generic forms of utterances in various spheres of human activity is immensely important to almost all areas of linguistics and philology. A clear idea of the nature of the utterance in general and of the peculiarities of the various types of utterances (primary and secondary), that is, of various speech genres, is necessary, we think, for research in any special area. To ignore the nature of the utterance or to fail to consider the peculiarities of generic subcategories of speech in any area of linguistic study leads to perfunctoriness and excessive abstractness, distorts the historicity of the research, and weakens the link between language and life. After all, language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well. The utterance is an exceptionally important node of problems.