

## Abstract

Within the professions, writers are expected to express themselves in certain ways, often within genres that are bound by conventions, including linguistic register. The student entering a profession learns those genres as if they are mandatory and static, and conforming or failing to conform to conventions is believed to have ties to career consequences. However, new members of a profession come to it with other habitual language practices affected—according to previous research—by the writer’s gender. Rhetorical genre theory and disciplinary, professional, and technical communication theory do not offer a full account for the ways in which these old habits and new conventions must interact, and previous research in gender and language does not fully account for how gendered persons write when confronted with high-stakes convention-bound writing tasks. I used tools from statistics and natural language processing (NLP) to assess stylistic features that previous research has associated with gender differences in written language: I applied those tools to texts created by law students near the end of their first year of study in the genre of a court memorandum, and I found there was no pattern of difference between male and female writers in these texts.

I propose a “cognitive pragmatic rhetorical” (CPR) theory, grounded in work of Straßheim (2010), who attempted to bridge the relevance philosophy of Alfred Schutz (Schutz, 1973, 1964, 1966) and the Relevance Theory of Sperber and Wilson (1995); I have extended Straßheim’s work with insights from rhetoric and cognitive science. CPR theory explains that these apprentice members of a professional community will expend great effort to conform to its conventions and genres because of the students’ goals and the practical effects that depend on conformity. Consequently, we expect them to abandon gendered linguistic habits, at least while they are engaged in early training. This dissertation demonstrates a methodologically rigorous gender-difference study; offers evidence for an “anti-essentialist” view of gender differences in communication; and gives insight into the process by which apprentice members of a profession adjust their communicative processes in response to their training. It demonstrates the utility of CPR theory and NLP tools in scholarly inquiries in rhetoric and disciplinary, professional, and technical communication.