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# Reflections on the Ins and Outs of Business and Professional Discourse Research

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This book presents a collection of original chapters focusing on what, for lack of a more precise term, we have come to call the "INs and OUTs" of business and professional discourse research. Put simply, this means that we zoom in on the two extreme ends of the scholarly process investigating written, oral, non-verbal and digital communication in business and professional settings. On the one hand, the volume includes a number of chapters that deal with issues of gaining access to and collecting data, and addresses questions like: how can we convince practitioners to let us observe, record, interview, survey? What counts as data? How much data do we need? What shape and form can the data take? How does our research interfere with the professional practices we study? On the other hand, there are a number of chapters that look at issues of feeding results back in the form of recommendations to practitioners. Questions here include: how can professional discourse research be applied to help shape practice? How do we translate our methods and concepts for the communities that we investigate, including industry, government and non-profit organizations?

In this introduction, we set out to provide a concise "state of the art" account of the field of business and professional discourse research as this is relevant to the agenda of the book, as well as explaining the significance and contribution of this book to the field. Next, we hope to detail how the notions of IN and OUT that are pivotal to this volume are conceived here, and in what ways they can be seen as relevant to the broader methodological debates and literature in the field. Finally, we will try to illustrate how the chapters, individually and as a set, contribute to addressing these issues.

## Business and professional discourse research

The field of business and professional discourse research is richly interdisciplinary, attracting scholars in applied linguistics and discourse studies as well as sociology, management, marketing and information systems. In fact, it is far from clear what exactly is covered by the terms “business” and “professional”. In this volume we take them to refer to language and communication in or around the workplace, a relatively new but fast-growing research area served by major international journals like the *International Journal of Business Communication*, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, the *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice* and *English for Special Purposes* along with important handbooks, anthologies and monographs, including but not limited to Candlin (2002), Koester (2006), Bhatia & Gotti (2006), Palmer-Silveira, Ruiz-Garrido & Fortanet-Gómez (2006), Garzone & Ilie (2007), Bargiela-Chiappini (2009), Gunnarsson (2009), Gotti (2011), Candlin & Sarangi (2011), Varcasia (2013), Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2013), Schnurr (2013), Kong (2014) and Bhatia & Bremner (2014). In the past two decades or so, these and other studies have generated a wide range of research focusing on institutional and organizational practices in scientific, medical, legislative, legal and business contexts, some with a clear intercultural, multilingual or critical perspective, others looking to connect with classroom teaching and pedagogy or consultancy and practice. In terms of methodology, a lot of work in business and professional discourse studies can be linked up with Critical Discourse Analysis (see Machin & Mayr, 2012 for an update), genre studies (from meetings (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997) to press releases (Jacobs, 1999)), Conversation Analysis (see for example Drew & Heritage, 1992 for a pioneering work as well as, more recently, Antaki, 2011), ethnography (Rampton et al., 2004) and linguistic pragmatics (Östman & Verschueren, 2011), to name but a few of the many paradigms that have proved inspirational in this area. Recently, scholars have zoomed in on specific key features of discourse in institutional settings, including competence (Pelsmaekers et al., 2011) and trust (Candlin & Crichton, 2013, Pelsmaekers et al., 2014).

The chapters in this volume can be considered a product as well as a reflection of this tradition, but they seek to explicitly address those issues arising from the many and multi-faceted interactions between researchers and practitioners that come with the analysis of text and talk in the workplace. It is from this intriguing space between theory and practice that the notion and exploration of the IN and OUT that this volume deals with emerge: as identifying and establishing shared goals, priorities and methods of enquiry to link and help mediate perspectives from both scholarly and professional points of view, while at the same time building a bridge for collaborative problem solving and mutual trust. In line with Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2013), we see the study of business and professional discourse as essentially contextual and intertextual, but also as self-reflective and self-critical, and working towards reconciling the prescriptive ambitions of the US-centred business communication tradition with a more descriptive approach favoured in discourse studies and applied linguistics elsewhere (see Swales & Rogers, 1995 for an early collaboration). Interestingly, Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2013) present profiles of a wide range of researchers who have approached business and the professions from very different angles, including Gina Poncini, who calls on scholars to go "into the company to do research on actual communicative practices" and seek "interdisciplinary dialogue and collaborative work with scholars from other disciplines" (35), Leena Louhiala-Salminen, who promotes "the utilitarian goal of disseminating knowledge that increases the effectiveness and efficiency of business operations" (35) and Janet Holmes, who is in favour of "integrating quantitative and qualitative research approaches, and the need to describe as much context as is needed to understand what is going on" (37).

## INs and OUTs

One function of how this volume conceives the IN is finding collaborative and productive ways of gaining non-invasive access to practitioners' discursive contexts and practices, whether it be office, telephone, correspondence, web pages, or social media, spoken or written, in order to observe or collect data for analysis and evaluation. A variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches can be seen here as ways of collecting valuable information which can then be described, interpreted, evaluated and, if thought relevant and useful, turned into corrective input as prescribed practice to help reach mutually agreed upon goals or solve independently discovered problems in communicative practices. The latter can then be referred to as OUT.

Gaining access to data has traditionally met with numerous institutionalized obstacles including questions of confidentiality, trust, protocol or legal disclaimers. But perhaps the most poignant of obstacles is that of not finding common ground between practitioners and researchers. Poncini (2004, 68–70) has summarized the wide-ranging perspectives on issues of accessibility to data and confidentiality with regard to spoken and written communication. Limited or complete lack of access to data, she argues, is seen as inevitably inhibiting research or conditioning it negatively. These perspectives appear largely fatalistic, reflecting a lack of flexibility or dialogue between practitioners and academics, with frustrated researchers facing exclusion and disadvantage without recourse. The problem of access is seen as one-way, merely factored into the research process as an obstacle.

Crucially, one insight that seems to be emerging from the chapters in this volume is that a prime reason why academics are denied access is that they are typically seen to be coding what they have studied in terminologies and meta-language of their own, painting what seems to practitioners as a distant, obtuse, alien and irrelevant interpretation. In order to overcome these obstacles, both researchers and professionals need to collaborate to identify and establish common ground, and agree on a feasible plan of action, incorporating both academic acumen and practitioner know-how. Clearly, professionals and academics are bound to see the same object of study in very different terms, and not all practitioners are willing to share perspectives with or welcome input from theoreticians, thinking it irrelevant and lacking in the experience they have acquired on the job.

The OUTs, then, are conceived as the flip side to the INs. Collective insights gained from reflective evaluation of practices which are then reformulated into suggestions or operative solutions reflects this volume's idea of OUTs. Underlying the motivations for examining the INs and OUTs is an effort to re-think the relationship between theories which language in business and professional communication draws from, and the practice it hopes (or claims) to inform: one that calls into question what kind of theory (and how much theory) is useful, as well as seeking the intricate balance of how practice-driven approaches should inform theory and vice versa.

In addressing this double IN and OUT challenge spelled out above, the volume ties in with a growing body of literature in the broad field of applied linguistics that foregrounds issues of reflexivity, relevance and, crucially, inter-relationality with a wide range of other branches of language and communication research and beyond. Candlin & Sarangi (2004), who coined the term, have argued that this inter-relationality, this interweaving of relational trajectories, "imposes its own price"; it raises a number of concerns, all of which "nominate themselves now as key questions" for scholars as well as practitioners to address (227): how to conduct research, what analytical models to draw upon and – echoing Candlin's earlier (2003) "so what?" – how to appraise the impact of research in terms of its practical relevance. It is exactly this price that the contributors to the volume set out to help pay. As editors of this volume, we are well aware that embarking on such a venture "invokes not only research collaboration and partnership as a central practice, but researcher deference, humility and participant respect as core tenets of applied linguistics", leaving practitioners to determine what might be useful for their purposes, facing up to "the sometimes uncomfortable possibility that our findings may be part applied and part ignored, or even misapplied" (Candlin & Sarangi, 2004, 227).

All of the above implies that the contributors to this volume engage to various degrees in self-reflection on their roles as researcher (see also Litosseliti, 2010 and Paltridge, 2011), whether – in Sarangi's (2005) words – "as invited or self-imposed; as assessor of performance; as expert and agent of change; as a resource for transfer of expert knowledge/methodology" (372). Admittedly, it is not always clear which of Sarangi's (2005) four major paradigms of research the various chapters in this book belong to (applied, consultancy, or consultative, in addition to pure research) – and indeed it is not really necessary to be able to clearly distinguish between them –but all, invariably, aim beyond "enlightenment" towards "engineering" and "influence" (372) – somewhat like a doctor who tries to help cure a patient.

Obviously, it is not just applied linguists who have been concerned about the consultative rapport between researchers and practitioners. Those active in information design and technical communications, to name but two other disciplines, have long tried to combine theoretical and practical relevances. Since the mid-nineties, *Information Design Journal*, for example, has been focused on the "usability" and "overall effectiveness" of verbal and visual messages in trying to meet the needs of particular audiences.

The present volume is therefore essentially interdisciplinary, collecting data- and case-based studies, best practices and self-reflections or meta-analyses, drawing on a wide range of qualitative, quantitative and critical perspectives on professional and business discourse, from ethnography, corpus studies and sociolinguistics to interaction analysis, genre studies and document design. The professional settings investigated include small and medium sized companies, multinational corporations and arts centres in Europe, North America and Southeast Asia. Chapters focus on legal issues, entrepreneurship, sales and marketing and public relations as well as issues of multilingualism and intercultural relationships. The book brings together researchers based in eight different countries on three continents.

## The IN chapters

The IN perspective explores the challenges, processes and methods for gaining access to and collecting data in professional settings. Included are issues of collaborative working relationships, trust and consultative rapport between practitioners and analysts, selection of relevant sources, the quantity and shape of data, the negotiation of roles and the question to what extent research interferes with the practices studied.

Presenting two large ethnographic projects in workplace settings, Dorte Lønsmann explores how researcher positionality is negotiated in interaction with informants. She argues that positionality is not stable, but dynamic, emergent and negotiated in the interactions between the researcher and the informants, and that it is multi-dimensional: that is, that viewing the researcher–informant relationship solely in terms of status and power is too narrow a view. She also explores how these negotiations of positionality impact on access to data at several levels. For example, Lønsmann digs deep into matters of researcher identity when she explores what it means to be a girl in a warehouse and a local talking to locals. While her ultimate ambition is to study multilingualism in Danish workplace settings, the focus of what she is dealing with here is on the actual preconditions for research.

At first sight, Deborah Andrews seems to be in a very different business. Drawing on fieldwork at four research sites (two design firms in London; a co-working space in Portland, Maine; and plans for a new office to house a start-up business data security firm near Boston, Massachusetts), she sets out to enquire into how the physical environment of a work space shapes, reflects and sometimes subverts the kinds of communication required to get work done there. But there's more. Very much like Lønsmann and the other contributors to this section of the book, Andrews thoroughly reviews the strategies that she has adopted to gain access, and she accurately describes her approach to gathering and weighing her data.

Annelise Ly looks at role enactment – a role-play in which the informants are put in a familiar situation and play their own roles – and she argues that it is an interesting method to generate reliable and representative language data in the workplace. In doing so, she demonstrates that the naturally occurring data and the interviews that most researchers resort to present serious limitations, particularly with regards to access, time and control of variables.

With Carmela Briguglio's chapter we return to the multilingual workplace, this time two multinational companies, one in Kuala Lumpur and one in Hong Kong. The main focus of her analysis is on the gathering of data, including the identification of suitable workplaces for observation, the strategies used by the researcher to find companies willing to take part in the study and the various methods that she employed during a number of visits to these workplaces (observation, surveys, interviewing and analysis of documents). Again, Briguglio, like the others in this section, takes time to reflect on issues that traditional research reports take for granted.

Astrid Vandendaele, Tom Bruyer and Geert Jacobs write about a student research project in the area of employer branding, commissioned by the Belgian division of a multinational in the food industry. They deal with how the student researchers try hard to get to grips with the corporate data, and especially with why they fail to do so. Based on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the views of all parties involved are solicited in what could be seen as a 360° analysis of the INs of student research.

The final chapter in this section takes us to the crossroads of the legal and translating professions. Juliette Scott reflects on the setting up of an action research project looking at how translated written legal discourse is procured from freelance practitioners by law firms and in-house counsel. She looks at the power of academic channels, professional bodies and online media, at leveraging the practitioner–researcher's network, and at serendipity.

## The OUT chapters

The OUT perspective explores how theory-informed descriptions of language use and needs may inform and shape practice through mixed methodologies: by providing evaluations, suggestions, or consultative recommendations, in addition to models, templates, or tools. These are considered as resources to better implement and achieve company objectives that relate to or depend on language choices. It sets out to specifically demonstrate the potential illustrative applicability of findings and their practical relevance to the practitioner, thereby loosely addressing Sarangi's (2002, 1) question: "How can the researcher's perspective on these discursive practices help improve practitioner understanding and trigger a change in practice?"

Drawing on research in Alto Adige/Südtirol (South Tyrol), an Italian and German speaking province in Northern Italy, Elena Chioccetti deals with multilingual knowledge management in a number of small and medium sized companies (SMEs) in bilingual areas. She proposes a set of very practical strategies that can be implemented in order to address the challenges involved.

Chiara Ganapini's chapter is based on an on-going research project set up in co-operation with an Italian company called InterPuls SpA. It brings a conversation analytic perspective to the interplay between salespeople's contributions in "talk in interaction" and their efficacy in building interpersonal relations with customers. Ganapini shows that evaluation represents a powerful interactional resource to be cultivated.

Peter Daly and Dennis Davy present a multi-dimensional analysis of the rhetorical and linguistic features of two-minute native speaker investment pitches and how it enables the development of a process model that can be used by entrepreneurs in the crafting of their pitches. Their data are drawn from the famous BBC television programme Dragons' Den.

Cecilia Lazzeretti takes us into the world of museums, and zooms in on the press releases that are traditionally issued to announce upcoming exhibitions press announcements (EPAs). Her chapter reports on a diachronic study carried out on a corpus of EPAs issued by American and British museums between 1950 and 2014. The take-away message she offers to practitioners is somewhat surprising: the increasing use of quotations, narrative sections and emotional language suggests that the genre is far from in decline, and able to co-exist with new public relations practices.

Based on a study of generic and lexico-grammatical features found in a corpus of anonymised internal investigative reports produced by a large multinational company, Glen Michael Alessi investigates how insights gained from genre analysis and corpus-assisted discourse analysis may furnish the company with future recommendations in fine-tuning these reports for a previously unaccounted for external readership of lawyers and paralegals. On a more general scale, he attempts to illustrate how academic research findings, based on the study of existing communicative practices, might better inform, improve and shape future professional practice.

Laura Di Ferrante, Walter Giordano and Sergio Pizziconi present a contrastive analysis of the Italian and American TV commercials of five Italian brands, and examine how business communicators should design promotional campaigns that are adapted to specific national markets.

To end with, focusing on email, Franca Poppi argues that rather than providing practitioners with a series of ready-made templates to be employed when needs arise, it is important to make them sensitive to the existence of different available options, depending on their own agendas. By helping practitioners raise their awareness of how it is possible to start out from one type of message but ultimately create another, she sets out to help them shape their own communication forms more efficiently and effectively.

## A final note

It should be added that assigning the various chapters to either the IN or OUT sections was of course based on a somewhat arbitrary decision. While some chapters clearly focus more on issues of access and data collection, none of them totally ignore the question of how to eventually feed the results back to those who kindly agreed to grant first-hand access to their professional practices. In fact, the central point made in Vandendaele et al.'s chapter is that it is not the "freedom" to investigate, but rather the idea of "mutuality" between the student researchers they observed and the practitioners whom the students worked with that presents the biggest hurdle. Similarly, while the central focus of Lazzeretti's corpus study of exhibition press announcements is on what practitioners can learn from a scholarly genre analysis, she does reflect extensively on how the data were collected. Maybe those scholars who are concerned with issues of access to the field are also the ones who spend more time thinking about how the results of their research can be made useful to that same field and so, paradoxically, one rich point to be taken from this volume on the INs and OUTs of professional discourse research is that the two cannot be strictly separated. Which is in line with the very notion of inter-relationality that set off this book project in the first place.

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