

THE HANDBOOK OF BUSINESS
DISCOURSE

Edited by Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh

www.cuppublishing.com

Typeset in 10/12 Ehrhardt MT and Gill Sans
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire, and
printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 2801 8 (hardback)

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Francophone research

Laurent Fillietaz and Ingrid de Saint-Georges

Introduction

In the Francophone literature, the term 'business discourse' is seldom used to describe the domain of applied linguistics devoted to the study of work (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007). Instead, authors usually refer to their area of research in a more general way, as being related to 'language and work' (*langage et travail*). This reflects the fact that research on business discourse in the Francophone area tends to be affiliated with a disciplinary field called 'work analysis' (*analyse du travail*) or 'activity analysis' (*analyse de l'activité*), namely an interdisciplinary domain of research and counselling practices not originally linked to language sciences but to which linguistics has contributed in an important way during the past few years.

From a theoretical point of view, 'work analysts' are primarily interested in understanding the complexities of contemporary forms of work. They also share an interest in implementing organisational changes, and in contributing to the personal development of workers in their professional environments. The orientation taken is thus not to study work from a managerial perspective (with a focus on explicit rules or evaluations that would be prescribed by the management), but from the point of view of ordinary workers responsible for acting in the workplace.

The goal of this chapter is to introduce the area of 'language and work' (*langage et travail*) developed within this Francophone tradition, and to discuss some of its main findings. To do so, we begin by contextualising the 'language and work' paradigm historically. Next, we describe some of the methodological orientations of that field and some of its findings. And finally, we discuss some of the methodological and epistemological implications of studying jointly language and work for applied linguistics today.

From business to work: the Francophone perspective

'Work analysis' is a label for a disciplinary field that began to develop in the Francophone area in the early 1960s and encompasses research, training and consulting activities that progressively proposed a renewed approach to the problem of labour. The field's

original aim was to help manual labourers cope with new work contingencies associated with modern forms of the industrial economy. Among work analysts, one common assumption is that in order to 'transform' situations at work which appear problematic, researchers must first attempt to 'understand' these situations in all their complexities (Guérin et al. 1997). To reach such a detailed understanding, they draw concepts and methodologies from psychology (Dejours 1999; Clot 1999), French ergonomics (Ombreane and Favergue 1995; Danielou 1996), economics, sociology and linguistics. They also study the workers' activities as they are accomplished in concrete work environments such as the manufacturing industry, the nuclear industry, or various service-oriented firms or institutions.

An important theoretical distinction brought forth through this study of actual work practices is the observation that a gap necessarily exists between 'prescribed work' (*le travail prescrit*) and 'accomplished work' (*le travail réel*). 'Prescribed work' refers to a task as it is supposed to be done and as it might be conceived by managers. In contrast, 'accomplished work' refers to real action as it is actually performed (or not) by workers in concrete production conditions. Work analysts do not aim at bridging the gap between these two distinct poles and find solutions to help workers accomplish work as it is prescribed by organisations. On the contrary, they view these poles as complementary elements of the workplace and necessary components of the workers' personal or professional development. In this perspective, work analysts do not privilege the work of managing instances or rely exclusively on the idea of 'business'. Rather, they focus on the workers and their ordinary activities, examine the creativity they show when faced with problematic situations, the strategies they deploy to adapt to organisational changes or the way they cope with psychological strains.

We have outlined in detail some salient properties of the Francophone approach to work analysis because, since the 1980s, a number of linguists have begun to contribute actively to its research programme, with a specific interest in investigating the use and impact of language in workplace settings. The Language and Work Network (*Réseau Langage et Travail*; see <http://www.langage.travail.org/polytechnique.fr>) did pioneering work in this domain. It is a group bringing together specialists from various disciplines (labour psychology, organisational sociology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, anthropology, economics) interested in the role of language in professional environments. The contributions of this network can be found in several collective books, which summarise the major results accomplished in the field so far (e.g. Boutet 1995; Grosjean and Lacoste 1999; Borzeix and Fraenkel 2001; Pène et al. 2001). Interested readers will find in Borzeix and Fraenkel (2001) the most recent and complete overview of the studies conducted so far by this network.

Because of space constraints, the abundant research produced by this network cannot be presented here in any exhaustive fashion. Four important orientations can nevertheless be highlighted. They are discussed below.

The status of language in contemporary work organisations

Through the detailed analysis of activity in workplace settings, the Language and Work Network has investigated the changing place of language in the contemporary workplace. Researchers have first observed that language and other forms of semiotic mediations

are becoming increasingly central in the workplace (e.g. reading control screens, sending computerised instructions etc.) even in jobs where direct manual manipulation and physical engagement were intensely used in the past. They have also pointed to the growing importance of language in a service-oriented economy: while tasks are becoming ever more complex, they also occur in environments that are more multilingual and multicultural than in the past (Bourret and Gardin 2001; Zarifian 2001). And finally, they have brought to light the emergence of a 'reflexive turn' in the workplace. Beyond the usual requirement that workers perform their work adequately, there seems to be a growing tendency to ask them also to be able to account for their work and to put into words their skills in the contexts of training programmes or evaluation procedures. All these observations point to the increasing role of language in work activities and call for the study of its functions as a key dimension of professional practice.

Addressing concrete issues and problems arising in different professional settings

A second prominent characteristic of the approach proposed by the Language and Work Network has consisted in responding to calls from various professional grounds (public administration, transportation industry, hospitals etc.) with the view of acting upon problematic situations in order to transform them (e.g. improving service quality, developing on-the-job training practices, improving motivation and personal development at work etc.). Since the nature of the issues for which their expertise is required is highly complex, researchers with this orientation have chosen to combine linguistic approaches with non-linguistic methodologies. They have thus contributed to building bridges between the field of linguistics and that of labour studies.

The forms of language used at and about work

A third orientation has been concerned with the textual and linguistic properties of oral and written discourses in the workplace. Some studies have, for instance, focused on work situations where language is central, such as in team meetings, face-to-face interactions, gatekeeping encounters etc. In contrast, others have analysed situations where language is only part of a larger stream of nonverbal activities. Relying on empirical material documenting actual language use in the workplace, researchers have analysed various forms of discourse using a vast array of methodological tools, from those classically used in business discourse research in the Anglo-Saxon tradition (e.g. pragmatics, conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication or corpus linguistics) to approaches anchored more specifically within the Francophone discourse analytical tradition (e.g. Benveniste's and Culicoli's theory of enunciative operations; Pêcheux's or Foucault's studies of discursive formation).

The functions of language in the workplace

More generally, the Francophone Language and Work Network has reflected upon the uses of language at work, providing different taxonomies for these uses (Lacoste 1995, 2001). Briefly summarised, it proposes that language simultaneously fulfils *pragmatic, contextual, relational and cognitive* functions. First, language plays a *pragmatic* role in the

workplace in the sense that it allows workers to accomplish and evaluate specific units of action. Language also fulfils *contextual* functions, enabling workers to interpret situations as well as to coordinate, plan or orient activities or participation within workplace environments. Language has, moreover, *relational* functions. It mediates social networks, power relations or identity construction. Finally, it also fulfils *cognitive* functions, allowing, among others, collective reasoning, problem-solving, knowledge transmission and construction, memorisation, and the spreading of information.

The initial founders of the Language and Work Network have clearly played a prominent role in structuring the Francophone field of business discourse. Other researchers have, however, contributed to its development over the years too. In the next section, we describe briefly some lines of investigations pursued by this larger circle of researchers. Their work often shares many epistemological assumptions with the pioneering work of the Language and Work Network, but without necessarily claiming affiliation to it.

Some methodological orientations and empirical findings

One classical way to categorise research is to examine the types of linguistic phenomena on which the authors focus. Do they focus on situations where language is a central dimension of work? Or do they focus on research interviews or other methodologies for accessing individual or collective representations of work? Depending on the perspective, a distinction can be made between research interested in 'language *at* work', 'language *about* work' and a combination of both. We explore these three dimensions in the following subsections. Again, the existing literature cannot be reviewed exhaustively in this chapter. We thus propose a few pointers for each orientation, detailing briefly the methodological tools used for the analyses, the kinds of professional domains investigated and the main findings published so far. Interested readers can refer to Fillettaz and Bronckart (2005) for a more detailed overview of relevant empirical studies.

Researching the field of language 'at' work

Of the three orientations mentioned above, the field of language 'at' work has probably been the most fertile since the late 1980s. Traditionally set within the frames of ethnology, sociology or the micro-sociology of Erving Goffman, the research aimed at developing a better understanding of the relations between discourse practices and work activities. Different issues have been addressed in this area.

Coordination and co-operation in collective activities

This theme has been investigated in a vast array of professional settings, ranging from surgical operations (Mondada 2001, 2004a) to nursing (Grosjean and Lacroix 1999), museum design (Mondada 2005a), industrial production (Fillettaz 2005a), team meetings (Mondada 2004b, 2006; Fillettaz 2007) and research meetings (Mondada 2005b). These studies have paid special attention to the use of technological tools in the accomplishment of work. More specifically, they have reflected on the complexities of professional practices when they are collectively accomplished. As shown empirically, coordinating

activities is a complex endeavour, for at least three reasons that have been clearly identified by many Francophone authors:

- 1 Coordination results from the local and sequential organisation of interactions, and from the multimodal resources available to accomplish such interactions. Studies show, for example, that workers cannot rely on verbal utterances alone to coordinate participation at a local level. They need to combine a variety of semantic and material resources, such as gestures, movements in space, the manipulation of objects etc. These resources do not necessarily exist prior to their actual use but emerge as constructions that workers produce jointly in and through their situated interactions.
- 2 Workplace interactions are multifocused. In most professional settings, workers are constantly engaged in multiple tasks, whether alternatively or simultaneously.
- 3 Coordination does not occur exclusively in locally situated actions but also at an institutional level. Grosjean and Lacroix (1999) show, for example, that while an important part of nurses' work consists in engaging in situated joint actions (such as caring for patients, having coordination meetings with other nurses etc.), their work involves engagement beyond the local here and now. It requires, among other aspects, examining the *trajectory* of care for each patient and weaving links between local situations and the history of the patient in the institution.

Negotiation and decision-making

Grosjean and Mondada (2005) bring together studies describing negotiation processes in different professional environments (service encounters, public administration, shops etc.). The collective volume shows that deliberating practices are central in many professional activities. It also stresses the importance of studying such practices from a linguistic perspective. Other authors focus more specifically on the cognitive aspects of decision-making within groups. Detailed analyses of verbal exchanges are used to describe the mechanisms of collective reasoning. Theoretically, these studies borrow tools and concepts from interactional psychology, conversation analysis and speech act theory. The data relates to the study of coordination meeting in industrial settings (Grusenmeyer and Trogon 1995), negotiations and decision-making in hospital talk (Trogon and Kosulski 1996), and the study of genetic counselling sessions (Trogon and Barr 2006).

Interpersonal relations and identities

Studies addressing this theme focus primarily on service encounters, whether in retail stores (Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Traverso 2008; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2001; Traverso 2001; Dumas 2005; Doury 2001; Fillettaz 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2005b, 2006), call centres (Boutet 2006) or housing management (Cooren and Robichaud 2006). They highlight the view that interpersonal relations at work are often asymmetric and that language plays an important role in managing this asymmetry (Laforest and Vincent 2006). Moreover, researchers investigating this field often describe the difficulty for professionals in enacting

the role of expert in service encounters, particularly when clients challenge this expertise or when contradictory institutional demands are made upon them. Another fruitful area in the analysis of service encounters can be found in studies on politeness conducted at the University of Lyon 2 by Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni and her team. Studies concerned with analysing interpersonal relations and identities have contributed to discuss the distinction between 'functional communication' and 'relational communication'. Detailed empirical observations grounded in various professional settings show that exchanges that appear to be primarily goal-oriented can also be seen as opportunities for the construction of identities and the establishment of interpersonal relations. Conversely, exchanges that might appear on the surface to be about establishing relations (chatting, humour etc.) can serve other functional goals required by the situations at hand.

The linguistic properties of talk at work

A few studies in a vaster field of investigation can be selected to illustrate this issue. Boutet (2005) argues, for instance, that professional discourse genres differ from ordinary language use, and display specific linguistic properties on the syntactic, lexical or prosodic level. Falzon (1989) and Condammes and Vergey (2005) examine such a genre in the 'operational talk' used in airplane cockpits, highlighting some of the stable syntactic patterns used by navigating staff in managing aircraft work. In a different context, Boutet (2001) studies lexical creativity shown in certain professional settings and examines how workers transform technical vocabulary specific to their professions through metaphorical uses. Finally, Grosjean (1993) describes the prosodic features of midwives' talk in the delivery room. The findings in these articles stress the impact that work situations have on the organisation of talk. They provide empirical evidence for the claim long made by variationists that linguistic codes are not homogeneous or universally shared entities. They demonstrate that, on the contrary, linguistic forms are shaped by the uses that social and professional communities make of them.

Writing in the workplace

Three major strands of research can be highlighted here. A first orientation consists in focusing on written communication between institutions and their general audience. Clerc and Kavanagh (2006) report, for example, on a research programme formulating guidelines to help the government of Québec communicate better with its citizens through the improvement of administrative documentation, websites, and other official documents. A second orientation includes numerous studies analysing 'procedural texts' (e.g. prescriptions or instructions). Often associated with international standardisation procedures (e.g. the International Organisation for Standardisation - ISO) or oriented towards quality control, procedural texts increasingly develop in all kinds of work environments, beyond the industrial field where they originally appeared (Veyrac 2001, Pène 2001). More innovative perhaps is a third orientation, which concentrates on the writings workers spontaneously produce in the course of their activities. Fraenkel (2001) thus shows that written texts are not static or fixed units in the workplace. They are caught in the dynamics of groups at work and undergo transformations in the course of the complex trajectories to which they are subjected. Fraenkel thus reflects on the links between the

'acts of inscriptions' and the 'written forms' which are left as traces by these acts. Overall, the study of the uses of writing in the workplace is an invitation to re-examine the relations between texts and work. Texts have ceased to be viewed strictly as external to work activities (prescribing it, guiding it or supporting it). In fact, these studies show that they are deeply interwoven with professional practices and constitute one of the means through which work is accomplished on a local and situated level.

Researching the field of language 'about' work

In addition to researching language 'at' work, an important group of Francophone authors have also investigated the discourse of workers 'about' their work. Labour psychologists, for example, have used different *interviewing* methodologies in order to understand workers' professional practices better, or to induce changes in these practices. Different interviewing methodologies have been experimented with over the years. They come with different labels such as the 'explanation interview' (*entretien d'explicitation*; Vermersch 1994), the so-called 'instruction to a counterpart interview' (*Instruction au sujet*; Clot 2001), or the 'self-confrontation interview' (*entretien en auto-confrontation simple on croisé*; Clot 1999; Fata 2001; Kosutski 2004). These techniques do not necessarily share the same epistemological assumptions but they have certain common goals. For instance, they seek to produce one effect in particular: self-reflexivity regarding one's own practices. Interviews conducted in this perspective are seen as moments where, engaging in self-reflexivity, workers can become more aware of their own practices. This, in turn, is seen as a source of learning and development for the worker. In such interactional settings, workers become able to entertain alternative views about work practices, in particular views that are seldom expressed in more routine workplace interactions.

During the past few years, the interviewing techniques mentioned above have been applied in various professional settings (urban transportation system, the nuclear industry, teaching and education, public services etc.) and have led to several findings. First, they have contributed to a stress on the idea that language functions as a key mediation for representing and interpreting work. Considering that work is not a 'transparent activity', interviews are a tool for self-reflexivity. However, putting one's work into words is not an easy task to accomplish. Boutet (1995) notes from that point of view that the *discursive genres* available to describe one's own professional experience are very few compared, for example, with the prescribing and evaluative genres that can be found in managerial discourse. Researchers interested in language 'about' work thus insist that spaces of deliberation should be developed where workers can reflect on their practices with others, and find how 'ways of doing things' might differ. Therefore, they endow language 'about' work with a unique mediating capacity to help groups and individuals learn from experience. For a more detailed discussion related to these interviewing techniques, we recommend a collective book recently edited by Plazaola Giger and Strounza (2007).

Combining multiple methodological orientations

Some studies combine an interest in both language *at* work and language *about* work, and have developed specific methodologies to support it.

Carcassonne and Servel (2005), for example, are interested in the professional identity

of insurance counsellors, and examine several types of data to investigate it. They thus compare the image of professional counsellors as it is displayed in institutional documents, with the role insurers claim for themselves in interviews, and the roles they enact in their interactions with clients. Analysing the different images produced, the authors show that while the roles counsellors claim for themselves in interviews largely match the identity profiles found in institutional documents, their manner of enacting it with clients differs considerably. The authors attribute the gap in their data set between represented and enacted roles to change in progress in the institution studied.

De Saint-Georges (2003) similarly combines analyses of various forms of discourse in her study of work in an institution providing training for low-skilled unemployed youth. She examines institutional documents, video-recordings of situated activities, and audio-recordings of meetings evaluating the activities, with the aim of developing an understanding of 'anticipatory discourses' (plans, projects, intentions, prescriptions, scheduling etc.) within the institution. Set within a critical discourse analytical framework, the study explores the roles of anticipatory discourses in funneling or constraining activities. It explores the effects of anticipatory mechanisms on the local level of planning and enacting work, but also, on a larger scale, for professional conversion and re-engagement (de Saint-Georges 2004). It discusses too how preferred organisational futures are negotiated and undesirable ones are challenged (de Saint-Georges 2005).

Research in the Language, Action, Training (*Langage, Action, Formation*) team at the University of Geneva has also been very productive in combining an interest in investigating the role of language both 'at' work and 'about' work. Under the supervision of Jean-Paul Bronckart, the team's focus over the last few years has been on understanding the role played by language in accomplishing and interpreting work in various professional settings, such as nursing, the pharmaceutical industry and teaching (Bronckart et al. 2004a 2004b, forthcoming; Filletrez and Bronckart 2005; Revoz and Filletrez 2006). At each site, the researchers have collected several types of data: procedural documents, audio-video-recordings of actual activities, interviews with workers before or after their productive activities. Analysis of the data has identified recurrent patterns of talk about work and details of its linguistic features. It has also shown that instances of such talk (e.g. describing situated actions, describing recurrent practices etc.) cut across the three professional settings examined and appear in a variety of discourse types. On a more general level, the research conducted in this area has contributed to discussing in a more detailed way the relations between discourse competencies and professional skills (Bulca and Bronckart 2007).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have introduced the reader to some of the main questions and approaches existing in the Francophone area of research on language and work. While we have only been able to provide a few pointers to a vast literature, this brief review has allowed us to discuss some of the possible links between the Francophone tradition and the Anglo-Saxon field of business discourse. For some aspects, the two fields overlap. They address similar issues (coordination, identity, power relations, professional discourse genres etc.) or rely on similar methodological frameworks for data analysis (conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, speech act theory, pragmatics etc.). But the

two traditions also differ quite importantly, as when the spotlight is cast on 'workers' primarily, on their first person account of their activities rather than on 'business' and the institutional level of organisations.

To sum up, three additional observations can be made following the review of the most salient Francophone research on language and work:

- 1 One important accent might be on how the concept of 'action' has structured the theoretical discussions in the Francophone literature. Many studies have highlighted the usefulness of studying organisations through a semiology of action, which describes organisational activities in terms of action units. The importance of the concept of 'action' may be linked to a more general underlying interest which cuts across the Francophone body of research: beyond investigating the complex functioning of modern workplaces, researchers show a more global interest in better understanding human activity.
- 2 Generally speaking, the study of professional settings has also greatly renewed the themes and issues addressed by applied linguistics. If linguists are increasingly focusing attention on topics such as polylogues, gestures, multimodality, multiactivity, temporal dynamics etc., it is partly because these issues constitute prominent features of professional practices. Goffman (1959) warned us long ago that the classical model of face-to-face interaction is not complex enough to account for ordinary verbal exchanges, and invited researchers to focus instead on the study of richer 'social encounters'. One just needs to observe work-in-action to be made aware of the fact that simplified theorisations of social interactions do not account adequately for the complexities found in work environments. The Francophone research, by analysing work in its linguistic dimensions, has also contributed to renewing the theoretical and methodological discussions about language in general.
- 3 Finally, in their analyses of professional environments, Francophone researchers have often gone beyond descriptive approaches to work practices. Instead, they have sought to contribute to the transformation of professional settings by using research findings as a means to induce organisational change and transformation. Bourier (2005, 2006) reminds us that taking a 'transformative' approach requires careful consideration of the ethical implications. Workers hold positions and develop in their professional environments. Analysing their activities thus puts them and the groups they belong to in the spotlight. In this context, the role of the linguist cannot be that of the mere observer. Participation in the work sphere, whether as an actor or an observer, necessarily contributes to the construction of non-neutral relationships, which also have social implications. This critical dimension has been recently discussed by many authors in the field of business discourse (Bargiela et al. 2007: 23ff). It is equally important in the Francophone area of research on language and work.

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