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# The Dissemination of Contemporary Knowledge in English



Genres, discourse strategies  
and professional practices

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## Introduction

Knowledge is an extremely complex phenomenon, as is the nature of discourse, and any investigation into the relationship between the two poses a not insignificant challenge for researchers in the linguistic sciences. For our present purposes, we shall adopt van Dijk's definition of knowledge (2003: 85) as "the consensual beliefs of an epistemic community". We shall also specify "knowledge dissemination" as the spread of knowledge within and across settings, with the expectation that the knowledge will be used conceptually, as learning, enlightenment, or the acquisition of new perspectives, attitudes and behaviours (Barba Navaretti *et al* 2010).

This volume brings together a series of studies on the nature of the dissemination of specialist knowledge in English, its various principles, conceptualizations, constructs and pragmatic dynamics, over a range of discourse genres: knowledge discourse is addressed to a number of audiences, expert and lay, in a variety of fields, legal, political, economic, institutional, academic, organizational and professional. The authors explore the use of language in the creation and diffusion of knowledge, in its transformation from being a mere repository of information, achieved through complex discursive processes. These processes use both general pragma-linguistic textual resources, and also derive from the communicative practices specific to the discourse communities in question.

Relatively small, original, specialized corpora have been constructed by the scholars for this purpose: oral, written and multimodal in type. These include European and British legislation on the regulation of electricity and the websites of the Big Six Energy Suppliers in the UK; corporate websites, on-line documents from The World Bank, UN Declarations, material from NGO organizations; research articles in medical journals; annual epidemiological reports issued by the E.U.

and the UK; the websites of two central banks, the Bank of England and the European Central Bank; internal organizational and corporate training and development webcast audio-conferences. The use of data retrieved from web 2.0 technologies is important in these investigations not so much for a study of the linguistic choices afforded and constrained by internet genres but for insight into the shaping of authorial purposes and their textual expression. In a time of “digital democratization”, the distinctions between expert and non-specialist audiences, public and private communication domains, are becoming blurred. The demands, rights and obligations of the general public in the global knowledge-sphere are changing, informative texts are increasingly being drafted with interested “consumers” in mind, and consequently “strategic texts” are taking centre stage in research agendas. These are texts which offer a rethinking of the way in which knowledge is managed: how it is built, elaborated and distributed.

A wide variety of explanatory and analytical frameworks are represented by the studies contained here: corpus linguistics, making use of what is now considered standard electronic text-processing methodologies, is present in nearly all of the analyses. However, the work collected here might well be considered a contribution to CADS, corpus assisted discourse studies, using a range of theoretical constructs: critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, 2003) with its emphasis on the management of knowledge, ideologies and power issues, emerges strongly in several topics, the public right to water, for example. In another chapter, on medical research articles, Systemic Functional Linguistics models (Halliday 1994), together with quantitative methods, are directed towards an analysis of scientific, academic discourse. The social dimensions of discourse are also combined with cognitive frameworks, in the chapter on corporate training events, in order to better understand discourse processing, its comprehension and interpretation, through framing (Bateson 1954, Goffman 1974), scripting, and the attendant creation of shared knowledge.

Conversational analysis and narratology (Norricks 2000) are central explanatory fields of enquiry in several chapters. Interdiscursivity, intertextuality and intersubjectivity (Bakhtin 1981, Bhatia 2010) are also common threads running throughout, and are prominent in chapters

on domain-crossing, from law to business, for example, and the variation between differently-placed, institutional, textual sources. Accounts of multimodal discourse and the use of visual texts, in particular, in pedagogical communication, provide the theoretical anchor for another chapter.

The important paradigmatic change in approach, overall, is a move from a consideration of texts as isolates, and as the sole starting point for analysis, to a systematic, multi-layered description of contextualization and its embodiment in discursive structures, forms and patterns (Linnel 2009 and Wodak 2011 provide useful models).

These various theoretical orientations result in a wide range of research findings about the mapping of cognitive and socio-cultural meanings onto knowledge discourses. In more than half of the studies, the approach is contrastive, whereas the remaining ones are restricted to a single, specific field. In all cases, the focus is on the ways language shapes conceptualization and the co-construction of epistemological frameworks for specific modalities, audiences and interactions. Some generalizable discursive strategies, however, emerge over the collection of studies, related to the following:

- (Re)contextualization: discourse is re-shaped and re-written for changing recipients with different purposes, and may reflect popularization or simplification of expert knowledge, or, on the other hand, switches between discourse communities, domains or fields.
- Re-conceptualizations: the previous two sets of strategies also contribute to a re-working of cognitive representations and mental models, through re-framing and re-scripting, these representations constituting the intrinsic epistemological components of knowledge.
- Trans-mediation and en-textualization: movement across different channels and modalities, from visual to oral modes, for example, which involves describable re-formulations and inter-textual affiliations.

The studies as a whole demonstrate the multi-levels of knowledge, its very varied typology, and its dynamic nature in ongoing co-construction,

maintenance and updating among heterogeneous audiences. The reflexive nature of discourse and context emerges: discourse and its understanding are adapted to the socio-cultural environment of its participants, while the socio-cognitive dimensions of the resulting discourse, in turn, effect changes in communicative practices and modes of thought. At a more detailed level, a wide range of textual features and pragma-linguistic patterns are investigated in the individual chapters, as the following summary of volume contributions reveals.

The volume opens with a discussion by RITA SALVI of the processes of re-contextualization in specialized English when moving from the fields of legislation to business. Using a corpus consisting of E.U. and U.K. legislative documents, and the websites of The Big Six Energy Suppliers in the U.K., she tracks how the language of the regulation for the market in energy and electricity is re-written into the business language of corporations. Using a quantitative methodology focused in the main on phraseology, and a qualitative framework focusing on intertextuality and interdiscursivity, she compares the flow of concepts and principles through these different genres and their transfer across contexts with different interlocutors and participants.

ERSILIA INCELLI uses a genre-based approach in the global water debate about public and private ownership, water needs and rights. Her corpus consists of documents produced by different discourse communities: corporate websites, The World Bank, online UN Declarations and NGO organizations. Drawing on a critical discourse analytical framework, she identifies key lexical and grammatical choices used in strategic text construction. She demonstrates how the opposing players in the global water debate position themselves both linguistically and rhetorically in order to justify and legitimize their activities. Discursive strategies such as self-authorization through knowledge claims and consensus-building are elaborated.

RENZO MOCINI investigates the evidential markers used in English medical research papers published in scientific journals, a genre where reference to evidence is of fundamental importance. Evidentiality is considered not simply as a matter of sources of information, but it refers also to the types of knowledge these sources provide, the status of the evidence and how it is assessed. Using Systemic Functional Linguistic models, quantitative data, and qualitative analysis, the

distribution and pragmatic functions of a series of evidential markers are analyzed. In the course of this process, the evaluative properties of evidential forms come to light, demonstrating how any scientific claim may be constructed in a more or less subjectified manner.

CHIARA PROSPERI PORTA looks at the dissemination of information in the field of public health by European and national institutional agencies. She compares two sub-corpora, Annual Epidemiological Reports issued by the European Centre for Disease, Prevention and Control (ECDC), and those published by The Chief Medical Officer, Department for Public Health, in Britain. Analyzing, in particular, narrative frames, metaphorical language, meta-linguistic moves and textual structuring devices, she highlights the role of proximal-distal stance in the discursive strategies involved in exchanging and constructing expertise and best practices, as well as in winning public acknowledgment for institutional actions.

JUDITH TURNBULL addresses the issue of the divulgence of academic knowledge, more specifically economic and financial information, to a non-specialist audience. The study analyses the varied educational resources provided on the websites of two central banks, the Bank of England and the European Central Bank, which are aimed at building understanding of the role and functions of central banking. Using multimodal analytical frameworks, she isolates the discursive strategies at work in the contextualizations created to convey abstract, theoretical and technical information to younger recipients. In particular, she shows how visual texts are used to facilitate information transfer and aid knowledge conceptualization.

JANET BOWKER concludes the volume with a second chapter on education and pedagogic discourse. The data consist of a recorded and transcribed series of audio-conferenced in-house training and development sessions in a North American-based transnational organizational consulting company. The research focus is the discursive construal of evolving organizational priorities as reflected in strategic internal communications between employees. The use of conversational analysis and framing theory reveals both the macro-interpretative and the micro-interactive processes at work in these knowledge management encounters. More specifically, narrative structures, shifts and embedding

illuminate the directive acts which are characteristic of this kind of didactic discourse.

The sum total of findings depicts a useful panorama of the diversity which knowledge constructs display, together with the complexity of the processes at work in their constitution. Significant generalizations emerge from the body of research about the fundamental nature of the interactions between language use, discourse, and knowledge creation and dissemination. The studies, collectively, have a marked socio-cultural significance: they make knowledge-sharing practices explicit, with their relevance for all stakeholders, irrespective of expertise or specialization, in our developing Knowledge-Able world. We share the hope that this latter will be increasingly characterized by open institutions and organizations, carefully-distributed knowledge, and equitable access to the sort of information that makes a difference. This perspective involves both educational and professional communities which are directed towards the development of the knowledge competences needed for effective participation in the contemporary knowledge-based society.

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