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Discourse, Identities and Roles in Specialized Communication

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Actors, Identities and Roles in Professional and Academic Discourse: An Introduction

The studies presented in this volume focus on two different areas of specialized communication which have been defined on the basis of the settings in which the relevant discursive interactions are embedded, respectively professional and academic. In particular, they investigate the way the actors involved, their roles and their identities are constructed in language and discourse.[1]

1. Constructing identities and roles through discourse

That language use in itself conveys important information about the actors involved in an oral or written exchange is something that has long been brought home by research in sociolinguistics, and especially in the area customarily referred to as 'variationist' that focuses on the social significance of language variation. The information that can be inferred from what goes on in a linguistic interaction even in the absence of any other form of contact with the interlocutor(s) is rich and complex, and includes personal traits like geographical provenance, sex and age, and primary sociological traits such as social class, nationality and ethnicity (cf. among others Trudgill 1974/2000; Chambers 2003).

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1   Most of the chapters of this volume are based on papers originally presented at the international conference 'Discourse and Identity in Specialized Discourse' organized by the English and Linguistics research group of the Department of Contemporary Languages and Cultures of the University of Milan at Gargnano del Garda (Brescia, Italy) on 24-26 June 2007.

    These elements by necessity emerge and acquire significance in
any linguistic exchange because of the primarily social and cultural
character of language as a product, contributing to bringing to the fore
aspects of the interlocutors' personality, status and background well
beyond the actual information explicitly encoded.

    But the assumptions underlying the studies collected in this book
are definitely more complex. As Benwell and Stokoe point out (2006:
26), variationist sociolinguistics theorizes identity "as a pre-discursive
construct that correlates with, or even causes, particular […] language
behaviours"[2], also presupposing an automatic causal correlation
between individual aspects of linguistic behaviour and certain traits of
social identity (Cameron's 'correlational fallacy': 1990). Instead, the
perspective here is more generally constructionist as it sees
communication not merely as a mode of representing but also a means
of constructing reality (Foster/Bochner 2008: 86), doing away with "a
notion of communication in which language was viewed as nothing
more than a vehicle or tool for describing or inscribing a pre-existing
ontological world", in favour of one which assumes that "language
activity mediates all attempts to represent reality" (Foster/Bochner
2008: 87). As is more extensively discussed in Garzone *et al.*'s chapter
(cf. pp. 213-214), this theoretical framework arose in sociology as part
of the 'linguistic turn' that affected various disciplines starting from the
late 1960s, and brought home the idea that discursive interaction is the
main tool in the construction of social worlds and the representation of
reality. This is not tantamount to denying any objectivity to facts, but
rather to considering "the role of 'phenomena' in terms of the different
descriptions, glosses, categories and orientations offered by social
actors" (Potter/Hepburn 2008: 277; cf. also Potter 2003)

    De Fina *et al.* (2006: 2) thus synthesise the implications of the
linguistic constructionist idea of identity:

        identity is neither a given or a product. Rather, identity is a process that (1)
        takes place in specific interactional occasions, (2) yields constellations of

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2   Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 26-27) point out that in this respect the notion of
     identity prevailing in variationist sociolinguistics is similar to that put forth by
     social identity theory (cf. Tajfel/Turner 1979; Tajfel 1982).

> identities instead of individual, monolithic constructs, (3) does not simply emanate from the individual, but results from processes of negotiation, and entextualization that are eminently social, (4) entails 'discursive work'.

The emphasis on discourse, rather than language, points to another fundamental difference from variationist sociolinguistics, and makes it clear that the main focus is not on linguistic structures in themselves, but rather on the use to which they are put in action and practice.

Resting broadly on these general theoretical assumptions, all the studies included in this volume start from the analysis of discourse practices as they are realized in texts, and the examination of the construction work embedded in those practices (Potter/Hepburn 2008: 279), relying on an anti-essentialist notion of identity and self as a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society (Berger/Luckmann 1967). More specifically, especially important is the notion of the multi-facetedness of identity as constructed in discourse, resulting from "the individual's psychological relationship to particular social category systems", basically gender, race, ethnicity, sex, and class (Frable 1997), but also age, social status, cultural background, and ideological stance. All these are individual personality traits and interpersonal relationships which contribute to determining personal identity, while social identity is determined mainly by membership of a group – nation, ethnicity, political party, community of practice, professional or organizational group (cf. Tajfel/Moghaddam 1994: 80-81). Incidentally, these two levels of identity – individual and social – also represent the main foci of identity research (Côté 2006).

Given this composite nature of identity, a useful conceptualization is that proposed by Kroskrity (1993), who talks about 'repertoires of identities', i.e. sets of identity options based on a linguistic repertoire which are used by speakers in the course of social interactions, so that they often project "polyphonous, multilayered identities by using linguistic variables with indexical associations with more than one social category" (Barrett 1999: 318).

In this volume, the focus is mainly on professional identity, which is dealt with both focusing on how it is established and maintained as group identity, and looking at its realization as a type of

individual identity (Richards 2006: 3-7). In the latter perspective, professional identity can be defined as "the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role" (Ibarra 1999). Within the professional context, the notion of role is at least as crucial as that of identity. Originally a theatrical term, 'role' was borrowed by the social sciences through the theoretical works of Mead (1934), Moreno (1946, 1961), and Linton (1945), and made popular thanks to Goffman's writings (1959, 1961); in broad terms it is used to refer to a form of characteristic behaviour or expected behaviour, a part to be played, or a script for social conduct.

In terms of analytical methodology, most of the studies rely on an approach that Fairclough has called "textually-oriented discourse analysis", as it gives special attention to the integration between micro- and macro-levels, taking into consideration text, discursive practices and social practices in their reciprocal relationship. In particular, as regards the latter two components, according to Fairclough (2003: 206) discourse figures in social practices broadly in three ways: first, it figures "as part of a social activity within a practice", e.g. as part of doing a job, or governing a country; second, in representations, i.e. in the way social actors within any practice produce representations of other practices, as well as ('reflexive') representations of their own practices, involving recontextualisation; third, it figures "in ways of being, in the constitution of identities", for instance in the way political leaders constitute their identity.

It is on the third of these aspects that this volume concentrates, looking in particular at how actors' identities and roles are constructed in various types of professional/academic texts with reference not only to the individuals and entities that are represented in discourse, but also, reflexively, to the authors themselves. Special attention is given to the interplay between the various constructs of identity – personal and social – discussed above and to the traits associated with each of them, in an effort to account for the relative importance of such components, the synergy or conflict between them, and the possible prevalence of one or the other as a result of peculiar facts pertaining to individual domain-specific contexts.

2. Contents of the volume

While in broad terms it can be stated that in all of the studies collected in this volume the area of investigation is that of professional communication, the chapters have been grouped into two main sections. Part I includes studies centred on professional and workplace communication proper, in the legal, medical and institutional settings, while the works grouped in Part II focus on one specific, well-delimited and differentiated area of the professional world, the academia: the individuals operating in it have chosen academic activity in a specific disciplinary field (which – broadly speaking – in general consists mainly of research work and university-level teaching) as their profession. In particular, the disciplinary areas considered here are economics, applied linguistics, law and medicine.

2.1. Professional discourse

Part I opens with SRIKANT SARANGI's essay on professional role performance in healthcare encounters, which has been chosen for this prominent position because in its introduction it focuses on the discussion and clarification of a number of concepts that are central to the contents of the section (and, to some extent, of the whole volume). Sarangi examines the concept of role in relation to cognate notions often used interchangeably with it, such as self, identity and status. In particular, drawing on Linton (1945), he sees professional role as strictly connected with status, given that it embraces the culturally defined norms – rights, duties, expectations, and standards for behaviour – associated with a given social position.

As an application of the notions thus clarified, Sarangi analyses examples of conversations in genetic counselling encounters and in consultations in a primary care clinic, and shows that the doctor's status carries with it an array of associated roles, or a role-set, leaving her/him in the position to choose which of a set of competing roles s/he is to enact in each specific circumstance. While a clear distinction

between the various concepts discussed in this study is crucially important in the professional perspective, Sarangi argues that linguistics/discourse/interaction research can contribute further to clarifying their distinctive meanings both theoretically and operationally.

After this initial more theoretically-oriented chapter, the following three contributions look at specific areas of specialized communication, examining the interaction between personal and collective identity components. In the first of such chapters JAMES ARCHIBALD discusses the impact of gender identity on legal discourse, identifying linguistic traits that indicate intense sensitivity to social facts and values as typically associated to female discourse patterns. He analyses a recent decision of the Supreme Court of Canada (now including nearly half of female justices) in which the contribution of female voices can be clearly perceived, with an important impact on the Court's moral responsiveness to social issues, resulting in what has been labelled 'judicial activism'. According to Archibald, this aspect is especially critical when parallel authentic texts in more languages have to be produced, because the sexual identity of drafters and translators can further influence the transmission of both explicit and implicit meanings by the choices made in drafting. In all of these cases, legal writing and translation may reflect an unstated gender orientation and power structure by virtue of the ways in which legal issues are addressed.

The identity traits explored in the following study, authored by COSTANZA CUCCHI, are those connected with national culture. The working hypothesis is that frequency in the use of pragmatic devices in spoken language is related to a speaker's national culture, so it can be considered as an indicator of national cultural identity. Looking at EU parliamentary discourse, Cucchi tests this notion relying on corpus linguistic tools to compare the use of general extenders – such as *and anything*, *etcetera*, *or whatever* – in native Italian and native English in the light of two of Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions, 'uncertainty avoidance' and 'power distance'. Her findings confirm that these devices are more frequent in the English than the Italian corpus, thus providing evidence of a preference in English EU parliamentary discourse for a more concise and familiar communica-

tive style, which reflects Britain's lower score on uncertainty avoidance and power distance as compared to Italy.

The 'power distance' dimension is also used – together with some other linguistic and, more generally, semiotic criteria – as a parameter in CINZIA SPINZI and ELIANA TERMINELLO's study of public notices in the U.K. and in Italy, which similarly looks at the influence of national cultural background on discursive identities. It shows that identity and social structures are reflected in the language of public communication through multimodal choices, persuasive strategies and cognitive frames, while language, at the same time, reinforces the identity of a national community and its culture conveying values of public concern.

In the next group of chapters, attention concentrates more specifically on professional identity as retrievable in language use at various levels and in the repertoire of genres utilized by domain-specific discourse communities. Genre is the main focus of PAOLA EVANGELISTI ALLORI's chapter. Investigating a corpus of sport-related International Arbitral Awards from the International Court of Arbitration for Sport she uses corpus analytical tools and methods, complemented by a qualitative analysis based on 'content knowledge,' to demonstrate that genre identity as determined by text content in conceptual and cognitive terms is an important indicator of the professional identity of the discourse community that generated the relevant texts. For this purpose she compares her corpus of sport awards with one of European Court of Justice judgements. Analysing the conceptual worlds underlying the two kinds of legal documents, Evangelisti Allori demonstrates that conceptual content is a powerful identity trait of genre, and genre in itself is a strong indicator of identity with reference to the discourse community that typically uses it.

This notion is used as a starting point and further developed in their chapter by ALESSANDRA FAZIO and MICHELA MENGHINI, who use a socio-cognitive model for language analysis to produce a knowledge structure representation of key concepts and correspondences related to sport arbitrators' professional and cultural identity. Analysing professional identity traits embodied in the lexical characteristics of the texts under investigation, the authors conclude that the sports-related arbitration discourse community shares

professional terminology and features of a specific professional knowledge domain above and beyond national and linguistic borders.

The crucial importance for professionals to possess adequate proficiency in the production and handling of genres and discourses within the relevant domain-specific field confirms the fundamental role that language plays in shaping professional identity. This notion takes on special significance in the context of activities aimed at training professionals to become part of the relevant discourse community. This is the topic dealt with by BETTINA MOTTURA, who focuses on the role of language in the process of definition of Chinese civil servants' professional identity, in a context where the role of public administration is being radically modernized and re-organized, and a new class of civil servants is being forged virtually from scratch. By imposing a repertoire of codified textual genres and training employees to become proficient in their discursive production, the State reinforces civil servants' perception of their institutional identity and their sense of belonging to a professional discourse community, at the same time simplifying procedures and increasing the efficiency of public administrative work.

The following chapter, authored by an interdisciplinary research group comprising linguists and sociologists – GIULIANA GARZONE, MAURIZIO CATINO, GIAMPIETRO GOBO, MIRIAM BAIT, PAOLA CATENACCIO, CHIARA DEGANO and SIMONE ROZZI –, is characterised by a typically constructionist approach and deals with communication in aviation, and more specifically with pilot-air traffic controller (ATC) exchanges. Similarly to other workplaces like call centres and helpline services, pilot-ATC communication is highly problematic, with the individual identities of the people involved remaining totally undefined and unstable, as they participate in the exchanges only through their voices, with hardly any other situational cue to rely on but language, and have to interact with ever different interlocutors. Pilot-ATC conversations are critical instances of professional communication in which individuals' identities are constantly under strain, as pilots engage in continuous efforts of recontextualization and controllers strive to provide communicatively effective indications to guide pilots safely, and involve highly momentous decisions, with misunderstandings potentially leading to fatal consequences. Starting

from the observation that under these circumstances, and above all in crisis situations, the most important level of communication is the pragma-linguistic one, given that it provides an interface between the operators' tenuous identities and volatile conversations on the one hand, and the real world on the other, in this study an integrated model for the analysis of communication failures in aviation accidents is proposed. This model integrates the results of the latest studies of the etiology of accidents with pragmalinguistic tools capable of giving an account of language use in different contexts, and is illustrated through the analysis of examples of miscommunication taken from the transcripts of a tragic accident that occurred at the Milan-Linate airport on October 8, 2001.

In the last chapter of Part I, authored by WILLIAM BROMWICH there is a shift from professionals' point of view to that of persons in need of care or reassurance, as it analyses a corpus of texts dealing with recent technological developments – handcycles and other human-powered vehicles – enabling people with a mobility impairment to take an active part in both competitive and non-competitive sport and to events such as the Paralympics. The main focus is on the presentation of self, and in particular the (re)construction of identity on the part of individuals recovering from major trauma, highlighting a shift from a language of exclusion and 'labelling' commonly used in the past to more inclusive language and a reaffirmation of individual identity following major trauma characterizing more recent texts. Another interesting finding regards a development in public discourse, i.e. the growth in the health sector of user-generated knowledge, in the form of peer-to-peer communication via the Internet

2.2. Academic discourse

The studies presented in Part II deal with academic discourse. Also in this case, the section is opened by an essay which discusses some general notions and issues that are prominent in the debate on identities, and roles in this area of professional communication.

As a preliminary step in her chapter KJERSTI FLØTTUM emphasizes the inherently polyphonic character of academic com-

munication, which is a powerful resource for identity construction. All texts, even those that are apparently monological in their form, generally have an implicit but clearly multivocal structure, as there is more to the presence of the author(s) than constructions with first person pronouns, and there is more to the presence of others than a straightforward identification of bibliographical references in the form of reported speech.

According to Fløttum, within this polyphonic framework, the projection of the author's self in academic research articles (RAs) is the result of an interplay between elements deriving from three main sources of identity-relevant traits: one is the national/native language culture the author belongs to; a second one is the world of academia, providing the author with a general academic identity, and a third one is the discipline in which the author is situated.

The evaluation of the relative weight of each of these constructs in academic discourse is the leading theme in the other studies presented in Part II, some of which examine them also in their relationship with other facets of scholars' discursive identities, such as those determined by gender and by concomitant professional profiles.

To illustrate the notions set out in her introduction, Fløttum presents a large and year-long contrastive study of English, French and Norwegian RAs within the fields of economics, linguistics and medicine, and shows that the identities manifested in these texts tend to be prevalently discipline-specific in nature rather than language-specific, indicating that discipline is more important than language with regard to cultural identities in academic discourse. Discipline is also a more important variable than language to explain the observed similarities and differences between articles.

These findings are confirmed by STEFANIA MACI's chapter which compares the argumentative strategies deployed in the *Discussion* section of medical research articles written in English by US and Italian authors respectively, looking at the distribution and linguistic realization of generic moves. The analysis identifies some peculiarities in the argumentative structure of Italian RAs, particularly concerning punctuation, linear sentence structure, use of passives, hedges, and understatements, which seem to be clearly linked to the Italian language and culture. However, also in this case the results of

the study indicate a predominance of discipline over language and culture so that in these academic journals professional identity prevails over national identity.

ULISSE BELOTTI also focuses on the interplay of disciplinary and cultural identities in research articles, and analyses a corpus of RAs written in English by Italian economics scholars. His aim is to pinpoint the specific identity of Italian economics researchers as an academic group, on the basis of the analysis of recourse to certain linguistic and discursive patterns and rhetorical devices – first person pronouns and determiners, evaluative expressions, acronyms, abbreviations and use of Latin phrases – which he had already identified as relevant in a previous study focusing on abstracts. The findings confirm the meaningfulness of such discursive traits, and their recurrence indicates that Italian economics researchers prove to be a cohesive discourse community whose works are characterised by a set of distinctive linguistic and rhetorical features.

In the next chapter, MICHELE SALA investigates whether in addition to the three main identity types that Fløttum sees at play in academic discourse – native/national, academic and disciplinary – there could also be an interference of professional identity traits in those cases where the researcher is also a practitioner. This is not unusual in the legal field where scholars often practise also as lawyers, an overlap of positions that is particularly interesting on account of the specific discursive connotations of the legal profession. By means of an in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of a corpus of research papers in law, Sala shows that the academic production of legal scholars is in fact distinctively characterised by an impingement of discursive traits that are typical of forensic practice and courtroom examinations, and in particular frequent recourse to various types of questions.

With DAVIDE SIMONE GIANNONI's contribution attention shifts more specifically to disciplinary identity with a focus on the set of values, inherent in the methodology and epistemology of every discipline, that contribute to shaping its domain-specific culture, together with common goals and practices. In particular, the main object of investigation is the use of metaphors, which Giannoni considers to be cognitive and rhetorical devices aimed at upholding

such values. In his study he explores the distribution and lexical repertoire of frequent evaluative metaphors employed by leading researchers in four unrelated academic disciplines. The evidence collected suggests that metaphoric lexis contains important cues as to the axiology that underlies academic discourse, as scholars assert their disciplinary identity and construct a credible authorial voice by signalling the relative value (or non-value) of knowledge claims in their writing.

In LARISSA D'ANGELO's chapter, the focus shifts to a crucial type of personal identity trait, i.e. gender identity. The study, based on book reviews in Applied Linguistics, looks at its impact on the way men and women develop their writing and research experiences, as James Archibald's chapter in this volume does with court judgements. But while in the latter essay, Archibald looks mainly at textualization, finding evidence of a more caring and socially sensitive attitude on the part of women, D'Angelo analyses metadiscourse as an indicator of writers' expression of their interpersonal standing and orientations towards their text and their readers. The findings show that there are differences between genders in text length and above all in the overall recourse to metadiscourse. However, in relative terms these variations due to the author's gender are not as relevant as the discrepancies found in the writing styles and in the use of interactive and inter-actional resources by 'expert' and 'novice' male and female writers.

Part II is concluded by a chapter by POLLY WALSH who examines the multiple roles played by academic lecturers, each connected with a specific disciplinary and/or academic identity construct, using Levinson's (1988) scheme of multiple participant roles developed from Goffman's (1981) notion of footing as analytical framework. Walsh shows that in the course of lectures, while the speaker-audience relationship remains constant at speech event level, at utterance level the speaker can change footing, choosing to project different identities. The results of the study, which analyses pro-nominal reference in three applied economics lectures, suggest that guest lecturers, whether consciously or unconsciously, deploy multiple identities with some skill, carrying out complex footing work to represent themselves and engage with the different elements in their audience.

3. Concluding remarks

The analyses presented in this volume collectively provide important insights as to how roles and identities are constructed and negotiated in professional and academic discourse. The picture that emerges is extremely complex, and confirms that identity is a composite and multi-layered construct resulting from the interplay among a multiplicity of components that are shaped socially and linguistically at various levels: in the speaker's/writer's presentation of self in discourse; in his/her representation of, and relationship with, others; in his/her positioning towards group membership; in his/her local management of interaction and enactment of social roles, etc.

The devices that contribute to identity work and role enactment are numerous and diverse. Those actually investigated in the studies presented here are lexicon and various forms of labelling, genre repertoires, pronominal reference, indexicality and other pragmatic resources, various types of metadiscourse, distribution and realization of generic moves, use of rhetorical figures, and in particular metaphors. In each case a correlation is established between their use and one or more facets of identity, thus shedding light on the factors at play in individual and collective identity formation through discourse. Besides, the identification of some of the mechanisms involved in this process provides a repertoire of parameters to be looked at in future research in this domain.

Of course, the findings presented here, albeit interesting, are far from conclusive. Establishing an association between the deployment of discursive devices and a specific identity-relevant trait is highly meaningful, but in order to prove that its significance is not only local, extensive further research is needed. In particular, it is essential not only to prove in absolute terms the necessary and sufficient correlation between certain discursive devices and relevant identity traits, but also to explain the reasons and implications of such correlation.