Professional Communication across Languages and Cultures

Edited by Stanca Măda
and Răzvan Săftoiu

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding the dynamics of dialogue at work

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1. Introduction

The workplace is an important social context which provides a major focus of research for sociolinguists and discourse analysts, who are interested in the relationship between language and society and how this is constructed and reflected in ordinary verbal interaction. The workplace has great potential in sociolinguistic research because it refers to issues such as language, power and politeness, intercultural communication, intergender communication as well as more general issues concerning the use of language in this particular context.

Changes in the last two decades in social sciences are reflected in the positioning of *interpersonal communication* as a focal point for both researchers and practitioners interested in the way organisations operate and develop. The multitude of research carried out in relation to language and workplace communication has sparked the interest of many disciplines such as linguistics, organisational studies (human resources, public relations, etc.), management, ethnomethodology, discourse analysis, communication sciences, social psychology, sociology and education of adults.

Somewhat surprisingly, only in recent years have studies of workplace communication emerged, and they were based on "real" data and authentic interactions collected from direct observations of participants in various workplace contexts. Many studies of organisational communication are based on material from secondary sources such as a researcher's own work experience, interviews with employees in key positions and anecdotal observations (only from time to time, only certain aspects, what seems relevant to a particular researcher, etc.). Linguistic and ethnomethodological research on professional communication is based on authentic data. However, due to difficulties in research, many studies have focused on rather specialised contexts such as classroom, courtroom, doctor-patient interaction (e.g., Drew and Heritage 1992, Sarangi and Roberts

1999). With some exceptions (Clyne 1994, Neil 1996, Roberts et al. 1992), the recorded data in other workplaces included planned interactions such as formal meetings where participants were relatively still and the noise was relatively reduced. The data gathered spontaneously in noisy environments such as offices (in which people move from one to another in order to solve problems) or production facilities (where many jobs require continuous movement and considerable noise produced by machines) are relatively rare. This is largely due to the general concept of the workplace as a complex and socially diverse environment where the practical requirements of problem-solving activities take precedence over concerns about communication, which is considered peripheral. Therefore, linguistic data collection during daily activities in an organisation raises other methodological issues (for a discussion of participatory methodology in workplace communication, see Stubbe 2001).

2. Professional communication

In this volume, we propose a survey of current interests in professional communication defined as an action game (Weigand 2009, 2010) between two or more interlocutors who share professional relationships in a given social and temporal workplace context (within an institution) via traditional (face-to-face) or mediated (telephone, video, e-mail) communication channels (Măda this vol.). Professional action games may occur as everyday encounters (a doctor giving a piece of medical advice to friends) or as institutional encounters (doctor-patient interaction in a medical care unit) and they are mainly defined by their purpose, that of getting things done. Achieving such an objective is highly dependent on the performative competence of the participants who get involved in a complex action game (Weigand 2006: 35–52).

The structure of modern employment has changed. In most countries where analyses of workplace communication are carried out, office activity as well as trades in which interpersonal communication plays an important part in the actual activity at work are predominant. Since the topic of this volume is very broad and allows many approaches, we consider it appropriate to suggest the choices made for this volume.

The invited authors analyse essential issues of professional communication in order to capture changes occurring in different parts of the world: New Zealand, United Kingdom, India, Romania. In the *workplace culture* we recognise strong influences of the Western business environment. Changes in Eastern European countries such as Romania have determined a new approach to *management communication* and a different practice during *meetings*. *Humour*, *irony* and *small* *talk*, aspects that have received little attention in relation to this type of communication, get new discursive meanings and functions in professional communication (Holmes 2000, 2006). As far as *communication by e-mail* is concerned, people have transformed this means of communication into a dynamic and very efficient one. *Distortions*, *deficiencies* or potential *conflict* situations in professional communication will be illustrated and analysed throughout the volume, proposing several techniques for avoiding and remedying them.

The difficulty of choosing a single approach for the analysis of professional communication resides in the complexity of the phenomena accompanying it. Depending on its features, each aspect of professional communication discussed in this volume is explored with various analytical tools. In Section 3, we will outline the general theoretical and analytical frameworks for the present volume.

3. Theoretical and analytical frameworks

Throughout the volume, the invited authors have highlighted a major sociopragmatic aspect, i.e. how language use in a professional environment is socially constrained and is constantly subject to variables such as relative power of participants, social distance and degree of interference of a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987: 15). In addition to these issues, the authors have emphasised the role of politeness in creating and maintaining harmonious working relationships and the way the extended communicative context contributes to building meaningful conversations and efficient written communication in the workplace.

Broadly defined as the study of language in use, *pragmatics* investigates the choices speakers make, the constraints on the subject, how speakers use language in social interaction and the effect on other participants. Among the multiple issues in pragmatics, we will mainly refer in this section to the principles and concepts related to communicative strategies. The study of the principles may be combined with the actual practice of conversational performance, including all aspects of language use, understanding and appropriateness. Interpretation of communicative strategies performed by the speaker and by the hearer shows the complexity of professional communication. The main approaches for professional communication within the volume are in line with applied pragmatics, focusing on specific issues in a context where efficiency is very important.

Sociolinguistic issues include comments on aspects of language used by the speakers, depending on their socio-cultural background, ethnic origin, gender, age or social class. The phenomenon of multilingualism, concepts such as prestige, power, politeness and the relationship of language with ideology are other aspects that help us identify how participants define their communicative identity in professional settings. Speakers use more or less obvious aspects of language in order to build social relationships (with interlocutors, the public or even absent people) and identity (in relation to society in general and other participants, in particular).

Socially appropriate behaviour depends on the observation of and compliance with general principles and specific rules that are covered by the concept of *politeness*. Broadly defined as the practice of organising a linguistic act, politeness may make a speech act be perceived as harmless, in accordance with the social expectations of the participants. As a normative notion in any society, politeness is part of effective communicative management. Leech (1983) provides a general approach in the analysis of politeness, starting from the *cooperative principle* which, as Grice (1975) puts it, is the foundation of all conversations. This means that speakers engaged in interaction want to cooperate and expect similar cooperative behaviour from their counterparts. Another basic principle in verbal interaction is the *politeness principle* proposed by Leech. The author suggests a number of maxims (e.g., the maxim of tact, of generosity and modesty) that govern the communicative behaviour of participants. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) also take as a starting point the cooperative principle. Their politeness model is based on two primary concepts: reason and face. Speakers are endowed with reason in order to make decisions on an informed basis and in accordance with their own interest. According to Brown and Levinson's research, a person's face has two aspects: negative and positive. The speaker's negative face refers to the desire of not being constrained by others in his actions, while the speaker's positive face refers to the desire of being accepted and recognised by others. The art of politeness means to obtain a balance between these two desires and to keep in mind that every speaker feels the need to satisfy both the negative and the positive face. Thus, the occurrence of a face-threatening act is minimised, while the chances of constructive participation are increased.

Linguistic research in recent years has benefited from the methodological and theoretical input of the so-called "interactionist orientation" (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2002: 6–7). "The premise of mutual conditioning of activities taking place at the speaker's and the hearer's level" (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2002: 6) is the starting point of the analysis. The extent to which this conditioning occurs depends on the situation of communication (especially the channel used by the speakers). In the complex process of interactive communication, specific to professional environment (e.g., meetings), we can identify written texts and verbal interactions that act as "lines" in a perpetual dialogue within the "conversation continuum" (Holmes 2000: 36). For example, an e-mail message can trigger direct oral communication, which can further lead to a subsequent telephone conversation or a detailed written report. While recognizing the importance of face-to-face interactions, we should also note their ethical failure in the professional environment. In the context of professional communication, perhaps more than in other fields, fixing important data in writing is a vital element of effective communication.

Because written documents are easier to classify and study, an analysis of verbal interaction must be done with a representative corpus, comprising direct recordings of spontaneous conversations. *Corpus linguistics* captures the authentic spontaneous interactional phenomena as they were produced and perceived, in their specific context. An important analytical feature that gives consistency to the present volume is the fact that, throughout the volume, the invited authors have analysed authentic verbal interactions in order to show the strategies used by the speakers and hearers when coding and decoding messages.

Starting from strictly linguistic considerations and moving towards cognitive, psychological and sociological ones (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2002: 7), our approach is moving towards what Schegloff (1991) describes as "social structure": "a concern for power (relations) and status and their distribution within social formations such as classes, ethnic groups, age groups, gender and professional relationships" (in Jaworski and Coupland 2001: 108). Social formations based upon professional relationships include communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992), in general, and the organisations in which they operate, in particular. Thus, relative social identity of participants becomes relevant not only to the levels of conversational organisation (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 1999: 43), but also to the level of discourse.

Simultaneously, the *communicative context* moves away from its linguistic component, towards non-linguistic aspects (gestures, mimicry, etc.), and, at another level, towards a particular social and ideological context. Broadening the concept of context influences the analysis of its effects on the production and reception of an utterance. Contextual conditionings often explain the choices made by speakers in the production of a text or of an utterance and provide a guide to a correct interpretation of messages at the level of the hearer. Communication principles and strategies offer additional keys to interpreting workplace interactions.

The cooperative principle and its subsequent maxims (Grice 1975) focus on illocutionary goals, while the politeness principle and its subsequent maxims (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987) focus on social objectives. Speakers use these principles and maxims in order to improve communication, and in order to achieve transactional objectives in the professional environment.

The concept of context can be related to different levels of analysis. The *local* level of an utterance is the closest one, being given by the current turn, the previous and the next turns. Interpretation of the exact meaning at local level is needed in order to make the transition to a second level of relevance for context analysis, i.e., the relationship between participants: their relative statutes, position in the hierarchy of the organisation, the period of time when working together, etc. While some theorists consider such a relationship a given, representatives of social constructivism argue that participants build their social roles during the interaction. In different social contexts, people tend to emphasise different aspects of their social identity.

Context includes factors such as the place where dialogue happens as well as prior knowledge that participants use during interaction: technical jargon, specific abbreviations or organisation-specific activities, etc. Such information helps the analyst distinguish levels of meaning and interpret correctly workplace dialogues. References to context that accompany most of the examples in this volume help the reader understand workplace dialogue as a whole.

In the end of this section, we will discuss the social significance of professional communication in a broader social context. At the institutional level, the range of acceptable strategies to express power is constrained by the dominant ideology and the values it promotes. Thus, managers can be direct, assertive, fiercely pursuing transactional objectives or, on the contrary, cooperative, conciliatory and promoting collegiality in the workplace. To what extent these approaches are manifestations of an attitude to authority and which are the values according to which an organisation guides its work are contextual issues that are covered by *critical discourse analysis*. An important concept in critical discourse analysis is *power* (Fairclough 1989). Generally speaking, the perspective taken by critical discourse analysis is "outside power", analysing "top pressures and possibilities of resistance to inequality in power relations that arise as social conventions" (Wodak and Meyer 2001: 3).

Communication becomes a tool, not only an activity that speakers do in the professional environment. The emphasis falls on the dynamic aspects of interaction and the way people, groups and social categories build their own identity through language.

The workplace is a melting pot that combines multiple identities: boss, subordinate, colleague, friend, team member, person, organisation representative, women, men, youth, elderly, the majority, the minority, etc. All of them communicate and reveal their identities in accordance with contextual constraints. It is the analyst's role to discover which identity is activated, in what context and by what means, so that the efficiency of solving problems at work is the primary objective, while transactional and social objectives are developed in a harmonious whole.

4. Key aspects in analysing professional communication

4.1 Meetings

Meetings are seen as "interactions which focus, whether indirectly or directly, on workplace business" (Holmes and Stubbe 2003: 59), being one of the most important decision-making contexts used today. Participants are dealing with sensitive issues or with everyday workplace business using various communicative strategies according to their objective or subjective goals and their social statuses. Whether in the position of chairperson or regular participant, the speaker aims at establishing and maintaining a certain balance between the power and the politeness dimensions of workplace discourse. Efficiency seems to be the keyword in deciding which strategies fit best in the particular context of every meeting. In order to be effective, any strategy requires certain communicative skills in the encoding and the decoding processes used by participants. The speaker encodes both the objective and the subjective purposes in a single utterance, which is almost simultaneously decoded by the hearer.

Researchers examined the discourse of workplace meetings from different perspectives: the discursive strategies used in the management of meetings (Barbato 1994, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997); the discursive realizations of status in meetings (Craig and Pitts 1990, Sollit-Morris 1996); the complex communicative processes involved in getting things accomplished interactionally through meeting talk (Drew and Heritage 1992, Sarangi and Roberts 1999); interruptions, seen as manifestations of power in meetings (Edelsky 1981, Craig and Pitts 1990); the amount of talk contributed by different participants as an indication of dominance (Edelsky 1981, Holmes 1992, Sollitt-Morris 1996, Holmes and Stubbe 2003); politeness considerations of participants' contributions to meetings (Pearson 1988, Morand 1996, Holmes and Stubbe 2003); and meeting management strategies and their grammatical interface, with special focus on how they instantiate ways of (emotive) argumentation (Gheorghe, Măda and Săftoiu 2008).

Meetings are the main venue of transmitting information, planning and organising everyday activity. During meetings, decisions are made and people work together in order to solve tasks. Mumby (1988: 68) considers workplace meetings to "function as one of the most important and visible sites of organisational power, and of the reification of organisational hierarchy". What is more, workplace meetings are also visible sites of politeness, collegiality and solidarity, or on the contrary, of disrespect and impoliteness, being an ideal context of "relational work" (Fletcher 1999). Regardless of their type, degree of formality or goals, workplace meetings are a dynamic communicative process based on presentation of points of view and on negotiation. When people are involved in this type of interaction, they use various communicative strategies that take into consideration aspects of politeness and contribute to the construction of power. Meeting management is a dynamic process in which all participants play a part, whether cooperative or resistant. Among the participants to a meeting, the role of chair is vital in carrying out an effective meeting. It is the chair's role to *set the agenda* and to *open the meeting*. It is crucial that the chair should *establish control* at this stage to ensure that participants orient to the chair's authority throughout the meeting. The chair also *keeps track of the progress* of the meeting, marking the stage that is reached and ensuring that all relevant issues are covered. Effective management often involves *negotiating consensus*. It is the chair's job to make sure everyone at a meeting knows the purpose of the meeting, what the issues being discussed are and that everyone knows what has been agreed upon. Related to this, it is the chair's role to make sure *everyone feels involved* in the decision-making process. This can include an appropriate amount of small talk and humour in the meeting. Sometimes the chairperson acts as a mere *mediator*, becoming as 'invisible' as possible when the situation requires such behaviour. In such cases, without the pressure exercised by the chairperson, people discuss more freely.

4.2 Humour

Attardo (1994: 300–319) systematises previous theoretical approaches on humour and makes a description of the three phases of performing a joke (preface, performance and response). Performing jokes is the most common humorous interaction type. Conversation participants explicitly or implicitly announce that they would perform a joke, sometimes by typical expressions such as *Do you know this one?* or *Do you know the one with…?* After the participants preface and perform the joke, audience reaction is manifested by spontaneous laughter, delayed laughter or even silence (Attardo 1994: 307). After a joke is performed, there are no set rules to take the floor, any of the participants being able to self-select, or to continue the subject interrupted by the performance of the joke, or to perform another joke. Performing jokes may be dictated by situational or social factors, and their continuation is generally by similar jokes (of the same thematic area or similar puns). However, "performing jokes is the least structured and most independent humorous type of interaction" (Attardo 1994: 321). When analysing jokes in Romanian professional communication, Măda (2009) found that this type of joke performance was rarely used and was limited to break time. Joke performance seems to be favoured in standard offices, but it is limited in production facilities, due to the specific activity (automated work, few people, etc.) and the situational context (higher level of noise, teams meet only at mealtime, etc.).

Workplace humour may have different features according to the community practice where it appears. We can identify doctors' humour, linguists' humour[1], office humour, workers' humour, journalists' humour, politicians' humour[2], etc. The scenarios of the jokes, typical puns, thematic coherence and types of characters allow us to say there is a particular type of humour – professional humour. The constraints and taboos that censor certain manifestations of workplace humour, the means of transmission (from the traditional – uttering the joke, to the modern – using the Internet[3]) and especially the functional aspects of workplace humour are characteristics of professional humour.

Humour becomes "professional" by means of a variety of sources, including

- familiar language;
- time spent in school and influences of the socio-cultural background;
- literary sources;
- historical and political sources (former communist slogans, ironically or humorously modified);
- other cultures (through direct contact, from collections of jokes, etc.).

Performing jokes in the professional environment may lead to a certain kind of inner censorship in individuals, who select and avoid taboo topics when the group membership and communication situation require. There are professional situations where jokes are unacceptable, and when the context allows performing a joke, the content should be appropriate. Among the safest topics of jokes in professional communication, we could identify work itself and its opposite, laziness.

Analysing humour in familiar language, Zafiu (2001) identified a special type of humour which she called "expressions of futility". Such expressions "ridicule and reduce the action, denying the effectiveness of various kinds of human effort" (2001: 261–263). To expressions such as "to twiddle one's fingers", "to run after a shadow", "to help Uncle Anthony kill dead mice", etc. one can add other expressions belonging to the context of "parody of political and economic inefficiency of communism" (2001: 261–263). Futility of any effort at work is a favourite topic

1. The term belongs to Zafiu (2001: 142).

2. For a humorous analysis of the types of politicians and their morals, see Tudose (1996).

3. Performing jokes is replaced with their transmission and receipt as written messages which are often accompanied by emoticons and smilies that convey the author's humorous intent. Once in the electronic environment, jokes are quickly transmitted and retransmitted. The author of the joke does not have "live" and instant feedback from recipients, but may receive no more than a short message, which assesses the joke.

of many Romanian humorous texts, which may be used either in family or professional environments. The main source of inspiration is popular wisdom.

Professional texts may also become a source of inspiration for professional humour. Procedures and internal regulations of an organisation are humorously presented as texts containing mini-scenarios adapted for the particular professional context. They are sent by email or ostentatiously displayed in offices. For example: "Rule 1: The boss is always right. Rule 2: When the boss is wrong, rule 1 comes into force."

Humour has been analysed as a specific mode of showing cooperation in communicative activities (Holmes 2006). Situational jokes that appear spontaneously in conversation were studied, among others, in terms of quantitative analysis by Tannen. Analysing a Thanksgiving dinner conversation, the author concludes that, in normal conversation, people spend 10% of the time joking (Tannen 1984). Privacy in the family environment determines the appearance of spontaneous humour. In the professional environment, Holmes (2006) conducted a large study of spontaneous humour occurring in 22 meetings, totalling over 20 hours of recordings, from various workplaces (13 private organisations and 9 governmental institutions), with a total of 157 participants (70 women and 87 men, between 3 and 13 people per meeting). The author identified more than 400 humorous instances, of which 123 were situational humour (Holmes et al. 2001, Holmes 2006: 33).

People who know each other and have a common sense of humour tend to build their humorous lines from previous speakers' utterances, thus generating a circular structure. In workplaces where collegial relationships are strong and teams are well formed, this type of humour is frequently met and performs a special social function: construction and maintenance of group solidarity (Holmes 2006: 33).

4.3 Small talk

In professional communication, small talk may function as

- marker of the limits, facilitating transition from one stage to the other;
- time filler ("to fill in gaps");
- source of reduction of formality during professional activities[4].

Due to its flexibility and adaptability, small talk is ideal for fulfilling these roles in close connection with marginal episodes (initial and final). Yet, small talk may

4. For a detailed discussion of functions of small talk in everyday speech, see Laver (1975).

appear in the form of *transition episodes* (Săftoiu 2009 and also in this vol.) releasing tension among participants.

Small talk can also expand or contract in order to keep up with the existing time and space and to accommodate communication requirements of each communicative situation. Depending on the time and space of a professional conversation, social verbal exchanges can vary in length. If they appear among participants who are simply passing (short hall meetings, for example), small talk is usually brief, fulfilling the canonical function of creating and maintaining social relations in a context whose main function is to find solutions to professional issues.

Small talk may also occur within and during official work time and functions as positive politeness or as a strategy aimed at building and maintaining collegial solidarity. Break time determines the time length of small talk and therefore its functions. Small talk allows building personal relationships and social ties between speakers and includes the so-called *shop talk* (work-related conversation, but not focusing on professional objectives: sharing information, holiday schedule, etc.). "Office" small talk reflects the influence of other factors such as closeness of the interlocutors, the relative status of participants, how busy speakers are and the norms of the organisational culture about this aspect.

The social roles of small talk in professional settings reflect two major concerns of participants: building and strengthening collegial relationships, on the one hand, and control of power, on the other. Multifunctionality of verbal interaction explains the harmonious blending of transactional and social objectives. Analysing small talk in professional settings reflects the importance participants give to social objectives within a framework which, by definition, has mainly transactional objectives. Strengthening social relationships has positive results in an organisation and therefore professional results of employees are better. Small talk and humour are key factors for the development of harmonious collegial relationships and they are communicative prerequisites for effective professional collaboration.

5. Integration through communication

This volume aims at demonstrating that the results of a thorough linguistic analysis may be useful in understanding the dynamics of dialogue in professional settings.

One of the biggest challenges participants face in the professional environment is maintaining a balance between transactional objectives of the organisation they belong to and building friendly social relationships with colleagues. Workplace interactions, whether their primary function is predominantly transactional or social, involve negotiation of the relationship. Oral discourse in professional settings has refined interactional resources which allow speakers to make subtle distinctions between creating social distance that reflects their relative status on the one hand, and maintaining good intentions towards colleagues on the other hand, while trying to achieve the current task and achieving the objectives for an organisation.

One of the reasons that employees leave their job is the general atmosphere of team work. Therefore, employee satisfaction depends on collegial relationships, which affect deeply the activity and the achievement of transactional objectives of an organisation.

Although good interpersonal relationships mean lack of tension, sometimes specific requests at work may lead to conflict situations. For example, an informal dialogue among colleagues, while helping to maintain friendly relationships, can distract speakers from their work, causing them to become careless or negligent. As a counterexample, achieving team goals or completing a major report may determine, at least for some time, low attention to the needs of colleagues.

Both functions of discourse (transactional and social) are equally important when analysing what is actually "said". Knowledge and use of the most appropriate communication strategies in a given communication situation is part of the necessary requirements for an individual to adapt to a new job. Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 166) state that social integration of the individual is the cornerstone of professional success. When studying how people with disabilities communicate in a professional environment, Holmes and Stubbe (2003) have shown that the use of humour and small talk is not very easy for people whose communication skills are not well developed (either because they do not use their native tongue when communicating or because of a disability). The content and style of small talk may contribute to building workplace culture as much as the specific rules of a weekly meeting. Patterns and types of humour used in an office are as significant for defining a particular interactional style as performing a direct speech act by a manager.

Distinctions between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in a particular interaction or situation are fine and often depend on the culture of a particular job or a community of practice (Măda 2009). Identifying the limits and avoiding unpleasant situations are cornerstones for a new employee. (S)he must "decipher" (linguistic and paralinguistic) signs indicating changes such as transition from small talk to transactional dialogue, from joke to seriousness, or from critical remark to irony.

Frequency and distribution of humorous situations and small talk at work can be systematic patterns that are easily recognised by older employees, but completely unknown to newcomers. For example, it is difficult to identify a situation