Editorial

Engaging with Professional Practice across Domains through the Lens of Applied Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

This editorial outlines the theoretical framework in which the papers included in the present issue are set. The guiding principle laid out is that investigations of professional practice cannot be limited to the analysis of language use in itself. The inherent diversity of applied linguistic research is discussed, and it is pointed out that what binds much of this research together is the identification of societal problems that are linguistically and discursively manifest, with a conviction that the researcher-analyst has the necessary tools to approach the data, resulting in insights that would be practically relevant. The difficulty achieving this practical relevance leads researchers to position themselves differently and draw upon different research paradigms, some of which are then discussed. The editorial concludes that challenges remain with regard to how to strengthen the interface between professional practice research and applied linguistics, including the occasioning of critical reflections about applied linguists' professional practice.

Keywords: applied linguistics, professional practice, Applied Linguistics - Professional Practice interface, reflexivity, research paradigms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The studies included in this special issue of *LCM* explore the role and scope of language and discourse in professional practice across a range of institutional domains. They are based on presentations originally given

at the 5th International Conference on *Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice* (ALAPP) held in Milan in November 2015. The ALAPP conference series provides a forum where scholars working within applied linguistics and discourse analysis extend their engagement with professional practice within and beyond the educational domain, with a commitment to uncovering what lies beyond specialised language use, the principles that underpin professional practice and the extent to which linguistic and discursive insights might carry potential relevance. Along these lines, the contributors to this special issue analyse selected aspects of professional practice and anticipate emerging trajectories in this relatively novel field of study.

To illustrate the broad conceptual and methodological frameworks in which these studies are set, it is useful to anchor this thematic issue in the inaugural editorial of the *Journal Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice* (JALPP) which has set the agenda for the interface of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice (Sarangi and Candlin 2010). The guiding principle laid out in this editorial is that investigations of professional practice cannot be limited to the analysis of language use in itself, although language does play an integral role in the constitution and conduct of professional identity and expertise. In this respect, the notion of inter-relationality is especially useful, as it involves not only interdisciplinary collaboration and the integration of diverse conceptual and methodological perspectives, but above all "a commitment to exploring connectivities among the values, procedures and knowledge bases of those with whom we seek to collaborate in achieving purposeful action" (*ibid.*, 2). At the same time, due consideration should be given to the "institutional and organisational rules and procedures" in which "professional practice is embedded" (*ibid.*, 3; see also Sarangi and Roberts 1999; Sarangi and Candlin 2011). In other words, institutional and organisational rules and procedures derive from larger societal and cultural contexts, which will be manifest in patterned and contingent ways in individual instances of professional practice.

2. Research paradigms and perspectives underpinning this special issue

Applied linguistic research is characterised by diversity – at conceptual, methodological and relational levels. What binds much applied linguistic research together is the identification of societal problems that are linguistically and discursively manifest, with a conviction that the researcher-

analyst has the necessary tools to approach the data, resulting in insights that would be practically relevant. There is no one way of undertaking this analytical and implementational task, so researchers tend to draw upon different research paradigms and position themselves differently. When some stay engaged with language use, others extend their scope to cover multimodal aspects of professional practice. Furthermore, while some choose to look at traditional domains of professional practice in their respective institutional orders, others examine new forms such as social media and vlogs through which professional identities and expertise become circulated. The diversity also extends to different domains (e.g. healthcare, law, management, psychology, teaching, etc.).

In their entirety, the contributors examine the way in which language/ discourse shapes professional actions, identities and roles. Language use in professional settings is not only contextually and functionally determined, but is inherent in the practices themselves. Thus, the range of coverage includes systems (such as policy frameworks or the very nature of the legal process in different countries) as well as situated professional-client encounters (as in alternative dispute resolution [ADR] or in clinical encounters) – in many cases mediated through institutional mandates (Sarangi and Roberts 1999; Sarangi and Candlin 2011). As anticipated, the contributors selectively draw on different theoretical frameworks – dialogicism, postmodernism, social constructionism, etc. In a similar vein, the analytical frameworks range from micro to macro, including conversation analysis, discourse analysis and corpus linguistics, on occasions relying on a combination of methodologies to optimise analytical outputs and potential uptake of findings. Broad structural issues are tackled which relate to larger societal and cultural contexts; and reflexive approaches to professional practice are also attempted, with a focus on the way in which applied linguistic research can contribute to both establishing and interpreting discursively-mediated professional meta-practice.

Of all the research paradigms covered here, those centred on linguistic and discourse analysis have a longer tradition behind them. In more recent years, researchers have tended to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, making use of corpus data and software-aided analysis. This is the case in Giulia Pennisi's study, which deals with mediation as a discourse-based activity. The challenge posed for mediators concerns the use of language in a neutral manner in situations that are in themselves inherently conflictual. Pennisi uses computer routines for her analysis of a corpus of empirical data, and in her conclusion emphasises the crucial importance of language awareness in the emergent professional practice of the mediator. Her findings provide insights into the way in which media-

tor identities and self-ascribed social roles are construed. The approach adopted here is socio-constructionist in nature.

Eugenia Dal Fovo's research site is the interpreter-mediated healthcare encounter, which is institutionally and culturally embedded. She uses a qualitatively-informed linguistic analytical framework to examine power asymmetry among the actors in terms of turn allocation and coordination of talk, and explores the strategies deployed by interpreters in order to deal with participants' emotions.

Using a discourse-analytical approach, Francesca Santulli relies on corpus linguistics, as does Pennisi, but with the difference that her data consists of policy documents on disability in the workplace. Santulli offers a comparative perspective in analysing the texts that are issued by international organisations and those that are available through private companies. So the engagement here is not strictly with 'discourse *in* the workplace', but rather with 'discourse *of* the workplace', i.e. metadiscourse that frames professional practice. The analysis centres on contemporary issues relating to inclusion, diversity, and disability, which increasingly mediate everyday workplace practices. The findings show that inclusion-friendly policies are often publicised (i.e., talked about), but these are far from being fully implemented (i.e. talked into being/becoming).

All professional practices are set against the background of macro-contextual factors, which both constrain and enable them. Janet Ainsworth's study foregrounds the spread of the adversarial model of adjudication, which has been progressively supplanting the inquisitorial model in many parts of the world. She shows that variations in an adjudication model also involve – amongst other things – changes in the participation framework during the adjudication process, with witness testimonies being given centre stage in legal systems where they were previously largely ignored. As a more diverse range of participants is statutorily endowed with the "right to speech" and the "power to impose reception" (Bourdieu 1977, 648), changes in professional practice ensue, which can be manifest in and through discourse. The paper alludes to how witnesses will have different kinds of agency to produce their versions of legal narratives, at times constrained by the yes-no response questions designed by lawyers even within the so-called adversarial adjudication system which is meant to be more open-ended and witness-centred.

Consideration of macro variables is extremely important for the applied linguist investigating professional practice in any domain. An in-depth comprehension of context in the broadest sense of the term is necessary not only to appreciate the inherently intertwined character of professional practice but also to suggest any credible change informed by discourse analysis.

A further dimension to be considered is the spread of new technologies and social media, which favours the rise of new professional profiles and new professional practices. Some of these new practices operate extensively in the web-mediated environment or are exclusively situated in it. It affords virtual spaces (e.g. Social Networking Sites) where professionals can expand their contacts and converse with colleagues and peers worldwide. This suggests that one cannot undermine the influence exerted by the structural features of online spaces on professional practice, as well as on professional self-presentation (Garzone 2016).

Roxanne Doerr's study examines work psychology blogs as a case study, with the stated purpose of evaluating the potentialities of blogs as sites of interaction for professionals. She explores the extent to which the blogging environment impacts upon the interaction itself, creating and fostering an informed and empowered online discourse community.

Giorgia Riboni's study of beauty vloggers both underscores how a new profession comes into existence because of the affordances made available in the web-mediated environment and points to the emergence of hybridity as far as professional practice is concerned. In looking at the discursive practices the beauty gurus enact and the contents they set forth in their YouTube makeup tutorials, it is no longer possible to discriminate between traditional categories such as professional and amateur when appraising beauty gurus, because the inherent ambiguity of their position requires that for the sake of professional success they should pose as amateurs.

Riboni's study can be seen as making a general point. To undertake professional practice research in the context of social media, it is imperative that the analysis goes beyond the linguistic dimension to address the visual dimension in which the vlogs – and other such genres – are embedded and are ubiquitously circulated through the web. The sheer complexity of the object of investigation, determined by the affordances of the medium, calls for an increasingly elaborate methodological and analytical know-how. Any text-based analysis will not suffice to capture the many variants of professional practice, including the institutional, social and cultural orders, not to overlook the affordances of the medium.

The last two papers in this issue take us in a different direction. They engage with reflective practice which marks a cornerstone as it enables professional practitioners to learn from their experience, evaluate the relevance of their work and frame appropriate questions. Albeit varying in some degree, Fumiya Ishkawa'a and Emma Lupano's contributions are both based on interviews with different categories of professionals as they elicit conscious reflections about their practices. Ishikawa's study examines the retrospective interview as an instrument used in teacher training to

encourage trainees to reflect upon their practice with a view to aiding the development of their working 'repertoire'. The aim here is to turn the trainee teacher over time into a "reflective practitioner" (Schön 1983). If in Ishikawa's paper the focus is on professionals' reflection-in-action (*ibidem*), Lupano's examination of journalistic professional practice shifts the attention to their perception of their own positioning within the Chinese sociocultural context. She analyses data from interviews with independent media writers in China, and finds that their discursive self-representation points to these professionals' growing awareness of their ambivalent role-positioning in the Chinese sociopolitical scenario.

3. Concluding remarks

The papers included in this special issue testify to the variety of objects of investigation as well as attendant theoretical frameworks, methodologies and approaches in our research endeavour concerning professional practice. Although the analytical findings are revealing and are potentially relevant, challenges remain with regard to how to strengthen the interface between professional practice research and applied linguistics, including the occasioning of critical reflections about our professional practice as applied linguists. Our ontological and epistemological practices need to be subjected to reflections across the *in/on* axes, to use Schön's (1983) formulation. The more we engage in professional practice research and frame our participation within an action-oriented research paradigm, the more we need to search for evidence of uptake of our analytic findings, and this remains an open question. It will mean going beyond noticing conflicts, tensions and ambiguities concerning professional practice as manifest in different domains of language use. It will also amount to acknowledging the limitations of our knowledge, as professional practice cannot be limited to language or discourse in the narrow sense. There is thus a need for creating and sustaining 'communities of interest' "which acknowledge differences in ontologies and epistemologies across given communities of practice/discourse/interpretation, but privileges the mutual interest in the phenomena under study" (Sarangi 2015, 28). This special issue is intended to be a step in the establishment of applied linguistic practices that are capable of "managing the tension between reflexivity and relevance" (Candlin and Sarangi 2004, 3), and, by extension contributing not only to the study of professional practice *per se*, but also to the critical assessment and amelioration of existing professional orders.

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