ELICITING TACIT KNOWLEDGE WITH A GRAMMAR-TARGETED INTERVIEW METHOD

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Abstract

Tacit knowledge represents a challenge to knowledge elicitation due to the assumption that this type of knowledge cannot be articulated. We argue that Polanyi's (1966:4) widely cited notion that “we know more than we can tell” represents a weak model of language that does not acknowledge the grammatical patterns in spoken discourse that we, as speakers, apply tacitly. We investigate the hypothesis that individuals articulate what they know through grammatical patterns, referred to as under-representation, without direct awareness. This thesis develops and pilots a grammar-targeted interview method aimed at unpacking specific grammatical features that occur in spoken discourse. The model of language from which these features are derived is Systemic Functional Linguistics. We report findings from three empirical studies of tacit knowledge in corporate organisations where we used the grammar-targeted interview technique to elicit tacit knowledge in the areas of knowledge management, requirements analysis and performance reviews. We compare this interview method with a content-targeted approach. The results show that the grammar-targeted technique produces less under-represented discourse thus allowing tacit knowledge held by the interviewees to be made visible. Based on the linguistic analyses undertaken in these field studies we propose that Polanyi’s expression “we know more than we tell” be reformulated to “we tell more than we realise we know”.

The dissertation of Michele Zappavigna is approved:

Chair	Date
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Date

This thesis is dedicated to two fine men: Allan Roy Horton, my grandfather, and his namesake, my son, Orlando Allan Jay Lee, born during Field Study 3.

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Conventions

Grammatical terms from Systemic Functional Linguistics are presented in arial font. These terms also appear in the glossary at the end of the thesis. Definitional terms from other theories are in *italics*.

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