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2022-12-13

Mauranen , A 2022 , ' Where is spoken interaction in LSP? ' , Iberica , vol. 2022 , no. 44 , pp. 7-16 . <https://doi.org/10.17398/2340-2784.44.7>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/354936>
<https://doi.org/10.17398/2340-2784.44.7>

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Where is spoken interaction in LSP?

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A matter that has baffled me about LSP research for quite some time is the relative lack of interest in spoken language. Wait, you may say, isn't there a noteworthy body of studies on conference presentations and lectures, and more recently, newer genres like 3MT presentations on their way to become trendy topics? Yes, I'm aware of that, and am happy to acknowledge the important work in those areas, but what I am concerned about is that there seems to be almost no interest at all in interactive speaking. Since my own research domain has been essentially academic discourse, I'm primarily talking about that here, but there is reason to believe the phenomenon holds more widely as well.

Just to be sure, I went through what three leading LSP journals, *Ibérica*, *English for Specific Purposes*, and *JEAP* had published over the last five years, and I found no more than ten papers altogether that had investigated spoken interaction. This is a minute proportion (2-3% in my quick estimate of all the papers), and although there were also some corpus studies with data which lumped together monologic and dialogic speech to look for a given phrase or sequence, and some papers on online communication that might be considered dialogic, the vast majority of what was published dealt with written genres, and a smallish minority with monologic speech, such as lectures and presentations of different kinds. The emphasis on written, mostly published text types, resonates with Hyland and Jiang's (2021) recent bibliometric survey of ESP.

One of the reasons for this preference for the written word may lie in tradition and the nature of the research field. Clearly, LSP is a domain of applied linguistics, and originated in a need to teach academic reading and writing skills to undergraduates in different fields. It has certainly come a long way from its early days of teaching specialist terminology. Applied concerns are nevertheless still primary in the field, which may go some way towards explaining why writing remains the central interest, and why lectures

and presentations are top priorities in the spoken mode. After all, undergraduates need to understand lectures and make presentations, aspiring academics want to make effective conference talks, and recent PhDs may want to dazzle future employers with their 3MT presentations.

The research field has expanded and developed in many ways over time, as evinced in Hyland and Jiang's (2021) recent study as well as Charles's (2022) survey of conference presentation topics in BALEAP from the mid-1970s. The latter paints a fresh picture of the field. Conferences are transitory but repeated events, attended by practitioners along with researchers, therefore sites where trends and new ideas are passed on much faster than is possible through the publication process. A conference focus also nicely complements bibliometric studies like Hyland and Jiang's, which reflect published research and their citations. Unsurprisingly, though, the frequent topic areas are not widely different in conferences from those prominent in publications and citation indexes. However, pedagogical interest seems even more prominent in Charles's study, with *students*, *courses*, and *assessment* among the top 10% of topics. What is common to both perspectives on the field's changing as well as enduring interests is the observed expansion and diversification of research topics over the decades, together with a distinct emphasis on the written word and the monologic mode.

It needs to be remembered that both overviews only investigated English, not the entire field of specialised communication. However, we can assume that the broad outlines would remain substantially similar if the whole field was included, given the proportion of English in specialised communication, with perhaps the exception of a characteristically English-language bias on international research publications, which is unlikely to be repeated in other languages to the same degree. It would nevertheless be interesting to see comparable surveys of LSP in other languages. Would the main interests and research topics remain the same if English was not included at all, or are the foci of LSP language-dependent, and if so, to what degree and in which respects?

Even if we continue with the tacit assumption that ESP roughly equals LSP despite the caveats, two questions remain: how exclusively applied should – or can – an 'applied' research field be, and why is interactive speech not of interest to LSP?

To address the question of applied research first, and specifically how useful applied research really can be on its own, I posit that the close

interdependency of applied and fundamental research is the cornerstone of any applied field. Applied research necessarily makes use of concepts, analytical frameworks and research methods developed in basic research. LSP is no exception: for example, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, statistical methods, and pedagogical theories all come from fundamental research in different fields.

Discourse analysis inspired a major transformation in LSP research in the 1990s, very much in the spirit of the time. This originated in Swales's analyses of research article introductions in the late 1980s, which he then published in his seminal book on genre analysis in 1990. The notions of discourse, specifically the concept of 'move', and genre as social action arose in different domains of basic research but were skilfully synthesised by Swales into a new research approach and combined with a pedagogical perspective. It shifted the focus of specialised communication to texts that academic experts write, and, more importantly perhaps, it shifted the interest in the field to original research of target texts from a novel viewpoint.

More generally, how we think about language reflects the ways in which language is conceptualised in current theories and findings from basic research. Our current understanding of language holds for example that an individual's linguistic repertoire is a changing and heterogeneous whole, that different languages are not located in different brain regions, that each of an individual's languages, including those they only know rudiments of, unavoidably influence each other, and that bi- or multilinguals are not only more common in the world than monolinguals but different from them in many respects that are advantageous to the multilingual. A conceptualisation of language that accepts these notions as relevant has meant notable change since the beginnings of LSP studies in the 1960s. Moreover, our general notions of language keep evolving and feeding into applied research. We may see things very differently again in the next decade or two.

This does not mean that applied research is doomed to remain at the receiving end of fundamental research. To begin with, the synthesis of concepts and methods, often from more than one field of basic enquiry, tends to be unique to a given applied field, as has been the case in studies of specialised communication. Swales's (1990) move analysis is a case in point.

Applied research can also contribute to basic research. Many questions, for example the interest in multilingualism, have arisen from practical concerns, because real-life issues do not revolve around the perfect monolingual that

was postulated as ‘normal’ through the best part of the 19th and 20th centuries’ linguistic thinking. One of my favourite examples of applied interests changing theoretical perceptions is dictionary compilation, which changed dramatically by the publication of the first corpus-based dictionary (COBUILD) in 1987. In the compilation process, it turned out that elements like collocations and multi-word units that are not reducible to the established categories of linguistic research such as morphemes, words, or clauses, are in fact repeatedly occurring and essential building blocks of language, and that the concrete meanings of lexical items that often first come to mind are not in effect their most frequently used meanings. These observations gave an enormous boost to corpus linguistics. Which, in turn, became an essential tool for researchers and practitioners in specialised communication. And if we look at contemporary research articles published in LSP, studies of multi-word units by corpus means are a normal part of the current researchers’ toolbox.

I think, therefore, that studies of specialised communication, like any other applied field, should also carry out research that isn’t inherently applied in the sense that it aims at some tangible or immediate improvement in professional practices. Not infrequently, I have seen papers offered to an applied journal that are clearly based on curiosity-driven descriptive or theoretical research by nature but have included a sentence or two at the end about the applicational benefit that the investigation might have. Often these imagined applications emit a somewhat glued-on feel to the reader, but at the same time they convey an awareness of the expectations of the field, or, perhaps, the publication forum. The question arises whether this really is necessary for the benefit of the field or the author.

If we look at research in specialised communication or applied linguistics more widely, we find studies that pursue a deeper understanding of phenomena that are relevant to the field without obvious applications. Such research can be important to the development of the field insofar as it explores questions that arise from our interest in specialised communication even if there are no immediately applicable or tangible findings in sight. Those may come later, and it may take time. Or perhaps the knowledge is simply not suitable for anything beyond satisfying our need to know and to understand. Disciplinary history, for example. It goes beyond my imagination how it could benefit professional practices, but it certainly adds to the self-understanding of both researchers and practitioners.

Some strands of research spread fast and wide outside their origins, like the genre analytical approach that was so influential in analysing research reporting but was also adopted for analysing other academically relevant texts with practical utility such as grant proposals, which are in demand among scientists and scholars both outside and inside LSP. But it also spread to texts outside academia that were common in for instance business or tourism. We find genre analyses of typical promotional genres concerned with hotel websites, holiday resorts, brands of sports clothing or fishing tackle, in other words genres with instrumental value for some branch of specialised communication.

A research approach can also become so generally accepted as relevant to the field that its usefulness is taken for granted. For example, the genre analytical approach was also applied to texts not likely to be particularly central to practitioners, such as author's acknowledgements or book prefaces. Such genres may offer fresh glimpses on, say, historical developments, or varying traditions or cultural practices depending on their analytical angle, but their contribution will perhaps be more in the category of 'nice to know' than 'essential to know' or have practical implications.

Based on my observations from the three LSP journals it looks like basic research is certainly represented in the publications, mostly of a descriptive kind, or concerned with methodological issues, and occasionally also as theoretical papers. Yet the overwhelming interest seems to centre around analysing scientists and scholars or students' writing and pedagogical interventions into either comprehending texts or lectures. Specialised communication outside academia is present but with a smaller share. The impression that comes across from a glimpse at the last five years is therefore a strong emphasis on academia and pedagogical interest.

Moving on to my second question, which concerned the lack of interest in interactive speech in the field of specialised communication – why indeed this lack of interest in dialogic speech? One reason may simply be the weight of tradition, and what have been perceived as the key objectives in LSP, such as student writing and, increasingly, research writing for publication, especially in EAP. The field has of course originated in pedagogic interests, which is not perhaps a goal set so much by practitioners themselves as their employers. And the motive to continue along this path is hardly declining. With the growing fascination, even obsession, with university rankings, and a consequent emphasis on research publication achievements, pressure has

been mounting on academics to publish, preferably in high-ranking international journals. As a result, universities in many countries are willing to invest in training their staff and students in research writing skills. Improving writing skills to boost their competitiveness may also be high on the agenda of individual academics. It is therefore also likely to come up in needs analyses.

However, if we target teaching strictly on needs as perceived by academics and other professionals or their employers at a given moment, we risk underestimating our own research-based knowledge and understanding of issues and priorities. I have seen something like this happen in different universities. My first personal experience from a very long time ago comes from the time I was a PhD student. Together with my colleague we offered a course in academic writing for academic employees, which we both had done research on, but which was then a new thing in our university. There was nevertheless great interest among scientists and scholars. Ahead of the course, we dutifully ran a needs analysis among those selected to attend. They told us about their wishes concerning grammar and vocabulary and elegant turns of phrase. We addressed the most frequently expressed needs, albeit from a perspective they did not expect, but they took this in their stride. However, we gave them something else they did not expect, namely a text linguistic perspective on research papers. After their initial surprise, this turned out to be what we received most praise for in the feedback questionnaire – in other words, they felt having benefited most from something they had *not* asked for. Our approach was new, and being researchers themselves, they appreciated a new take on things. This is not just an individual success story. People in non-language research fields are not usually able to articulate clearly what they might ask from a language course, because their notions about language most likely derive from their school days. Therefore, if NAs tell us that course participants want brilliant presentation skills, for example, it might just be possible to smuggle in some discussion skills on the side.

But to do this successfully we need research. We need research-based understanding of academic discussions of various kinds: conference discussions, undergraduate and graduate seminars and tutorials, thesis defences, laboratory work, and many others. There are, of course, myriads of fundamental studies already in existence and being done at this very moment concerning conversation, with whole linguistic schools dedicated to it, like Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics. Neither of these

is particularly interested in specialised communication, though, but more engaged with everyday conversations. To understand the kinds of spoken interaction that are relevant to specialised communication, it takes scholars whose research priorities lie in that direction.

Dialogic interaction is very different from monologue, whether written or spoken, in certain important respects. Above all, it takes place in real time, and cannot be pre-planned, because it is a collaborative effort. It is also very fast compared to reading or writing. In dialogue (or polylogue, which academic discussions typically are, but I use ‘dialogue’ to cover both), speakers and hearers are the same people, alternating in speaker and hearer roles in rapid succession. They need to adapt their speech continually to each other. They negotiate not only meaning and language between themselves as the discourse progresses into unforeseen directions, but engage in recipient design to make themselves understood, and in verbal and nonverbal feedback and backchannelling to indicate how they are following their interlocutor’s talk. To be successful, spoken interaction in a cognitive sense requires that interactants are able to align their linguistic representations and their situation models sufficiently to maintain a meaningful conversation. This is no mean task whichever language you do it in, and of course misunderstandings occur in all circumstances. In brief, then, dialogic speech is dynamic, unpredictable, and fast, and therefore demanding.

You may want to object by pointing out that precisely because speaking is so fundamental to humans, we can expect virtually everyone to be able to participate in conversations. Yes, we can, in the sense of everyday conversation. But specialised discussions require special skills that are comparable to differences in types of writing. We hardly assume that anyone who can write a Christmas card can by the same token write up a research paper if they have done the research.

While presentation skills are unquestionably important for students and academics alike, academia is especially heavily built upon argumentation and critical discussion in spoken interactions, which are scarcely easier genres to master than presentations. All PhD theses are examined, and in many traditions around the world this takes place in an oral examination, like a viva or disputation, where the candidate is to defend their work. This is usually an unnerving one-off occasion where the stakes are high, and you hope to be able to put on your best performance. Nevertheless, properties of the written thesis have been analysed from innumerable angles in LSP, but I have

not found many papers on the actual thesis examination interaction. Some academic traditions also carry out oral examinations for master's theses, but few papers have been published on these, either. Unlike presentations, discussions cannot be prepared in advance, though the requisite skills can be trained. Thus, one might think that such demanding skills should attract a wealth of research together with pedagogic interest.

That dialogic academic speech is a neglected, but much-needed topic area, came up in papers in my journal search that dealt with dialogic interaction. One which focuses on conference discussion sessions points out that “asking questions and making comments in conference Q&A sessions can be challenging for novice academics” Xu (2022: 63). I absolutely agree. I should think that this is a skill that would benefit PhD students about to attend their first conferences, and certainly postdocs seriously orienting to an academic career. Language professionals obviously cannot tell what counts as a good question or comment in a field outside their expertise any more than they can tell what makes a good research paper – but they can tell many things about the way people go about doing these activities with obvious success.

I found in my own recent research (Mauranen in press) that thesis examination events revealed fascinating things about academic discourses and their variation, as did conference and graduate seminar discussions. What is worth noting in the present context is that they differed radically from spoken monologues, but not substantially from digital dialogues. There is thus something about the dialogic mode that is special and differs from the monologic mode.

There are vast possibilities for doing important and relevant research for understanding academic communication that also enriches applications for pedagogic and other purposes. For example, most academics and students are multilingual these days, or, perhaps it's more appropriate to say that the applied linguistics research community is more aware of multilingualism than it has been in the past. The globalised reality of academia has become more and more apparent over the last few decades with increasing international research collaboration and student mobility, but everyday multilingual practices haven't received the research attention in proportion to these changes. Publications do investigate non-native lecturers' and conference presenters' linguistic expression, but most everyday university practices take place in dialogic interaction. There is normally a matrix

language that interactions are primarily framed in, but in addition to that, speakers' other language resources also surface and probably lead to borrowing and blends. How common this is, what forms it assumes, under what circumstances it is more common and when less so, and how it facilitates or hinders communication are all important questions if we try to understand communication in academia and eventually help it run as smoothly as possible.

Nonverbal and paraverbal communication is also a worthy topic whether we deal with multilingual, monolingual, novice, or expert dialogic communication. I noted only a single paper on the topic in the three journals over the last five years, but the field is potentially vast, including nonverbal communication between presenters and their listeners. Apparently, people's inherent ability to take in their listeners' or interlocutors' nonverbal communication varies widely, but this is the case with many skills that can nevertheless be improved with training. This is important for all those whose professions involve good presentation and dialogic skills, and worth taking up by researchers in linguistic communication analysis.

It is worth considering to what extent specialised communication research could also help improve practices in their own areas of research, in addition to that of others, and to providing courses or solving practical problems. For example, by analysing effects of factors like longer and shorter discussions, both of which are found in academic conferences, we might find out what length might be more conducive to generating new ideas and insights. We can also explore social factors in discussions such as subtle exclusion or inclusion, exercise of power and struggles over it by means of discussion acts.

In this Forum paper I have been trying to point out the paucity of research in spoken interaction in specialised communication, a topic area I would like to encourage researchers to take on board. There is an obvious need for skills of spoken interaction in more than one language in many walks of life, not least academia. Understanding how spoken interaction works effectively is important for making our courses and other applications of specialised communication research more relevant to the needs of professional communities.

Moreover, research into spoken interaction is important for the field of enquiry to go forward as a research field, because it is so fundamental to human communication and there are major gaps in our general

understanding of how it takes place and how it varies in the diverse settings of specialised communication. This is a question of basic research, which has implications beyond the special field of LSP, and it's important for any domain of scientific enquiry that wants to be taken seriously to have something to offer outside its own range.

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