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Editorial

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Workplace communication in flux: from discrete languages, text genres and conversations to complex communicative situations

1 Changing working life

Recently, changes in working life have become a prominent topic in academic research as well as professional literature and public discussions. It has been recognized that the contexts and conditions of work have become more transient and unpredictable due to global changes and megatrends related to, for example, migration, technological developments, and transforming values and lifestyles as the world becomes increasingly interconnected through the flows of information, workforces, materials and ideas (see e.g. Blommaert 2013; Gratton 2011; Sarangi 2011). In light of this transformation, changing working life can be seen as a cluster of change processes that influence the labour market and workplace organizations in various ways.

Firstly, the changes have to do with the very content of work. In post-industrial societies, work is to a great extent connected with knowledge production and the transfer and provision of various kinds of expert services. Moreover, in the complex and super-diverse (see Vertovec 2007; also Arnault et al. 2015) world where social and technological innovations play a key role, value creation is not only seen to lie in the effective management and distribution of information, but in its

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collaborative and inventive cultivation (e.g. Rooney et al. 2011; Williams 2010). Secondly, the changes have to do with the way work is organized. In contemporary organizations, hierarchical structures are often replaced by self-organizing teams and networks (Gee et al. 1996; Iedema 2003; Karlsson and Nikolaidou 2016) that may be temporary in nature and bring together people across various sectors and national, cultural, economic, political, and linguistic borders and boundaries (see e.g. Angouri et al. 2017; Lønsmann 2020). In such diverse and multidisciplinary constellations, organizational and professional roles and identities become constituted in new kinds of ways, especially as work is progressively accomplished with the use of technological tools and applications that change the established work practices (see Darics 2014; MacArthur 2006; Susskind and Susskind 2015). Thirdly, the changes have to do with job opportunities, the labour/professional market, and the definitions of work and competencies needed. Instead of life-long employment, more and more people earn their income through various short-term, overlapping and self-employed projects, which underlines the entrepreneurial tendencies of work and the fuzzy boundaries between work and non-work (see e.g., Prassl 2018; Woodcock and Graham 2020). This framework also conceptualizes professional expertise not as a single investment primarily achieved through education, but as competencies that rely on higher-order skills that need to be developed and sustained throughout the entire working life (Boyer et al. 2014).

These changes are happening globally to various degrees, but they are very salient for example in the Nordic countries, which have experienced a rapid transition from agricultural to technology-led information societies and welfare states, and at the same time have searched for new ways to create and maintain sustainable and equitable working lives and societal participation. Much political attention has been given to the trends shaping the future of work, new work practices, and the competencies needed, and debates about necessary reforms and alternative ways of generating jobs, wealth, and coherence of society have been regular topics in policy-making and media and public discussions (see e.g. Dufva et al. 2016). Contemporary work is manifestly accomplished in and through language use (see Williams 2010), and therefore applied linguistics has considerable relevance in this socio-political context, with the potential to inform societal debate and have impacts well beyond academia. The results of this research could be applied to research-based workplace training and social and educational planning, and used by, among others, politicians and other decision-makers as well as businesses, employers and professionals working with organizational dynamics (e.g. Sarangi 2008; for a critical perspective on the demand of "impact" on applied linguistics, see Cook 2012).

Although workplace and professional contexts over the last decades have gained more interest within applied linguistics, as a field of research, this discipline has been heavily focused on language learning in educational settings

(see e.g. Cook and Wei 2009). Educational settings are of course also workplaces, but the focus in such studies has predominantly been on the development of learners. Certainly, many studies have covered issues relevant to work life, such as migration (e.g. Blommaert and Backus 2013; see also Canagarajah 2017) and the use of different languages in corporate texts (e.g. Gunnarsson 2009a, 2009b). In the current special issue, the studies are situated within work*places*, focusing on practices of professionals in their everyday work, based on data such as observational field notes and recordings of interactions, interviews, and texts.

Despite a turn towards complexity and mobility (see below), earlier studies have typically focused on *established* organizational settings and practices, as well as on *discrete* text genres and types of interaction (see below). As communicative situations in working life become more complex, research methods and interdisciplinary research designs need to be developed accordingly, thus giving a reason to broaden the points of departure for research within the field. This special issue approaches contemporary social changes specifically from the viewpoint of applied linguistics and sets out to explore the conditions and developments of workplace communication in rapidly changing work life, with a specific focus on the changes themselves.

2 Studies of workplace communication in relation to applied linguistics

In this section, we briefly review research on workplace communication and language use in applied linguistics and its related fields, focusing on written and spoken communication as well as on intercultural communication and multilingualism.

2.1 Written and spoken communication

The accumulated research in applied linguistics on workplace and professional communication is quantitatively dominated by studies on 1) the academic sector, 2) text and writing. This impression of domination is partly due to the early studies in the field, including classical text analytical and corpus linguistic works such as Swales (1992), Bhatia (1993), Mauranen (1993), and Hyland (1998a), inspiring a vast amount of research on professional academic writing (e.g. Bondi 2006; Fløttum et al. 2006). This research tradition (often called genre studies, English for specific purposes or Language for specific purposes) typically studies how writers

or discourse communities (Swales 1992) employ texts for fulfilling their goals, including making a convincing impression on the reader (e.g. Bremner 2006; Connor and Mauranen 1999). Other studies apply a historical perspective, showing how professional text genres have developed due to different social aspects (Bazerman 1988; Gunnarsson 1997), as well as how various professions and communities have been constructed in close relation to their texts and genres (Doheny-Farina 1991; Geisler 1994; Myers 1990).

The focus in this tradition is often on discrete textual traits, such as metatext or hedges, on discrete specific text genres or part of texts (such as research articles or introductions), on certain academic disciplines, or comparisons of such disciplines (Lindeberg 2004; Mauranen 1993). Accordingly, methods such as corpus analysis have been used where voluminous (e.g. Fløttum et al. 2006) or smaller amounts of texts (e.g. Hyland 1998b) are analysed by computers and/or qualitatively, but traditionally without contextual data. Reasons for choosing data from established Anglo-Saxon and West European countries and traditional disciplines have often been implicit, and when other cultures are covered, they have occasionally been regarded as deviant (cf. below). With a few exceptions (e.g. Swales 1998), this research tradition seldom covers *workplace* communication, but rather focuses on communication within a certain profession working with external communication on a broader arena. We argue that this pattern is at least partly due to the focus on academic discourse, where professionals communicate predominantly through texts, often externally and internationally. Another possible reason is a holdover effect from the applicability ambition of the early studies, which were mainly focused on laying the foundations for educational needs, for example, how to teach students to write appropriately in a specific profession or discipline.

Overlapping with this sub-field, a research interest has emerged in non-academic professions and internal communications, and these were also originally motivated by a need for empirically grounded education in various professions (see Odell and Goswami 1985; Spilka 1993). Although it is predominantly focusing on text analysis, this line of research also includes on-site studies, interviews and other types of data (Brandt 2005; Brown and Herndl 1986; Louhiala-Salminen 1999; MacKinnon 1993). Based on these more diverse data, researchers could describe how professional writers related to different social aspects in their daily activities, why they chose a certain way of writing, and how they developed professionally through their writing. Some studies could demonstrate dynamism and a certain degree of complexity, such as research on the transition between education and work (Parks 2001; Windsor 1996) and research studying systems of genres in their contexts (Orlikowski and Yates 1994; Räisänen 1998). How writing integrates with knowledge, and how this integration is given an economic value in work life, was discussed by Brandt (2005; see also Heller et al. 2014; Jakobs and

Spinuzzi 2014). Economic and other interests of power were also studied by critical discourse analysis with data such as media and governmental texts (Fairclough 1992; McKenna 2000). Many studies, however, kept a focus on *discrete* text genres or *established* professions.

Later studies added even more diversity in chosen data and foci as well as in research problems and theories, such as in the fields of linguistic ethnography and new literacy studies. Although these predominantly examine educational settings, some studies within these fields have also covered the role of texts and writing in workplaces and professional settings (Rai and Lillis 2013; Tusting 2015). Research on written communication in non-professional occupations has been rare, although writing and literacy has been studied in "blue collar" work by Karlsson (2009a) who looked at truck drivers, among others, and Nikolaidou (2014) who studied production workers, and in "pink collar" work by Cuban (2008) who looked at non-physician healthcare workers, and by Tusting (2010), who studied the childcare sector. In these fields, the focus is rather on how different fluctuating aspects influence the agency and communicative actions of language users, and the data always come from real world settings.

Compared to studies on texts and writing, research on talk and spoken interactions in workplace and professional contexts does not hold such a clear position in applied linguistics, in part because such research is spread across various disciplines and research traditions, so that linguistics and language studies often cover and merge with, for example, social sciences and business and organizational communication. However, it can be argued that linguistic and discursive approaches to workplace talk and interaction form a distinct field of study that is characterized by its interest in language as social action with regard to different situational, institutional and sociocultural contexts, and its focus on micro-level language use through which work-related phenomena (tasks, norms, roles and identities) are accomplished (see e.g. Koester 2006). Methodologically, these studies have drawn on, in particular, interactional sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and linguistic ethnography; for data, they have used authentic workplace encounters and discussions collected, for example, through audio and video recordings (see e.g. Vine 2017 for different research traditions). In this way, the development of research on workplace interactions can be seen as an example of the processes in late modernity, in which disciplinary boundaries become more permeable than before (see Rampton 2012: 246).

Due to its focus on applicable results, interactional studies within applied linguistics have often dealt with interactional competencies that enable participation in practical workplace activities and are thus "central components of wider social abilities by which people gain access to multiple institutional worlds"

(Pekareh Doehler and Petitjean 2017: 1). Conversation analytical approaches have, in particular, aimed at identifying and improving workplace practices and developing the interactional competences of practitioners (e.g. Antaki 2011). In terms of workplace settings, both *frontstage* and *backstage* activities (see e.g. Schnurr 2013: 8–9) have been examined, with frontstage activities including communication in medical and health care settings (e.g. Li 2013; Sarangi 2016) and backstage activities including organizational meetings (e.g. Angouri and Marra 2010; Nissi and Lehtinen 2015; Svennevig 2012b) and performance appraisal interviews (e.g. Pälli and Lehtinen 2014; Van De Mieroop and Vrolix 2014; for an overview of various frontstage and backstage settings, see e.g. Koester 2006). Here, the research has typically aimed at uncovering the linguistic and interactional features typical to the studied setting, thus focusing, for example, on turn-taking, institutional roles, or topic organization in meetings (see Asmuß and Svennevig 2009; Svennevig 2012a). Prior research has also addressed issues of gender, power, humour, social relations, and workplace culture (e.g. Holmes 2006; Holmes and Stubbe 2015). Although the vast majority of studies on workplace interactions have investigated western, "white collar" jobs, there has also been an increasing interest in more versatile settings and contexts, seen, for example, in the questions of interactional and discursive construction of a workplace identity across the world (see e.g. Van De Mieroop and Schnurr 2017).

In the direction touched upon above, from the study of discrete, established genres, there are also studies that examine the roles and mutual relationships between spoken interactions and written texts in organizational practices, such as risk analysis (Karlsson 2009b) and organizational planning (Honkanen and Nissi 2014). These studies have shown that communicative processes at workplaces are often based on multimedial practices and complex intertextual chains that use both written and spoken language (see also Jonsson and Blåsjö 2020; Karlsson and Makkonen-Craig 2014). Some works have also analysed the very position of "talk" in contemporary workplaces, paying attention to new kinds of discursive devices that aim at "discoursing" across various professional and organizational boundaries, and by so doing, oblige workers to renegotiate their professional knowledge and identity (Iedema and Scheeres 2003). At the same time, these studies have challenged our understanding of what can be considered as a legitimate workplace activity (cf. Bracewell and Witte 2003). In particular, backstage activities include many areas where the boundaries of workplace communication may become blurred due to, for example, new kinds of digital technologies (Blåsjö et al. 2019). Moreover, in recent years, the analytical focus has sometimes shifted from language in and of itself to the way that language intertwines with other semiotic resources, such as gaze, gestures, body posture, space, and the manipulation of material objects. In particular, in the conversation analytical tradition, there has

been an increasing number of studies on, for example, various forms of technologically-mediated workplace interaction (e.g. Nissi and Lehtinen 2016; Oittinen and Piirainen-Marsh 2015). On the one hand, these studies have dissolved the distinction between "text" and "talk", and on the other hand, they called into question what actually counts as language and is therefore a suitable target for linguistic analysis.

2.2 Intercultural communication and multilingualism

This section briefly describes how matters concerning intercultural communication and multilingualism have developed in applied linguistics research. Within the area of intercultural communication, English as a lingua franca has a central position when studying professional communication (e.g. Evans 2010; Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005). Other languages, however, can and do also serve as lingua francas (see e.g. Amelina 2010; McGroarty 2006). Discussions about lingua francas – as about language in general – are always linked to questions of power, language ideologies, and to the different statuses ascribed to different languages. In work life, as in contemporary society as a whole, American and British varieties of English often have a dominant position, whereas other varieties of English as well as other languages are often ascribed a lower status (Bhatia 1997).

More recently, researchers have pointed to the need for studies of intercultural communication to revise and nuance the notion of culture: instead of viewing culture as something static that exists – that is, as something that people belong to or have – it should be regarded as something that we do or perform (Piller 2011; Zhu 2014). The ways that researchers view the concept of culture has significant consequences for the ways in which intercultural communications are investigated. The research paradigm of interculturality has the possibility to offer "an analytical stance that focuses on the role of interactions and discursive practice in negotiating relevance of cultural identities" (Zhu 2014: 218). Such identities are seen as "a process and outcome of negotiation, rather than something *a priori*" (218).

Intercultural communication can, according to Zhu (2014: 220), provide "an analytical lens to differences we see and experience in our interactions with other people who may look different from us, speak a different language, or speak the same language in a different way." The last part of the quote can be viewed in the light of the concept "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 1981), that is, the coexistence of different varieties within one language. From this viewpoint, all language situations are in a way "multilingual" in the sense that they always include, if not different languages, at least, different regional/social dialects, styles, etc.

On a wider scale, research about multilingualism in the workplace focuses on different types of interaction (e.g. meetings, sales, conversations) in different settings (e.g. small businesses, healthcare, multinational companies). Studies focus on, for instance, how different languages are used in meetings (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe 2004; Koskela et al. 2017), on how translanguaging (the integrated use of two or more languages in interaction) is used in sales (e.g. Creese et al. 2017; Zhu et al. 2015) and on how professionals in their writing processes often use several languages (e.g. Jonsson and Blåsjö 2020). In studies about multilingualism, questions about language policies, language ideologies, and the statuses of different languages often become relevant (e.g. Angouri 2014; Kingsley 2009; Markaki-Lothe et al. 2014; Rasmussen and Wagner 2002; Wodak et al. 2012).

In modern work life and a globalized new economy, language forms part of the symbolic capital and can be regarded as a commodity that has exchange value both on individual and societal level (e.g. Duchêne 2009; Duchêne and Del Percio 2014; Heller 2010; Heller et al. 2017; Thurlow, 2019). The increasingly important economic role of language is related to a number of societal change processes, such as the growth of linguistically mediated knowledge and service industries, computerization and digitization of the work process, and expansion and saturation of markets, which require the management of communication across linguistic and cultural differences and the attachment of symbolic – often linguistic – added value to standardized products (Heller 2010).

Recent works have revised ideas about what constitutes a language. Blommaert (2010: 1) states that "globalization forces sociolinguistics to unthink its classic distinctions and biases and to rethink itself as a sociolinguistics of mobile resources, framed in terms of trans-contextual networks, flows and movements." Blommaert (2010: 5) also suggests the paradigm of a "sociolinguistics of mobility" according to which languages are seen as mobile resources. Instead of viewing languages as stable, bounded and homogeneous units, these can be regarded as ideological constructions or "ideological artefacts" (Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 4), and rather than being a pre-existing system, language can be viewed as "an activity" (Pennycook 2010: 2), as something we *do*, similar to the concept of culture (see above). Blackledge and Creese (2017: 31) claim that "In order to understand social life in the 21st century we need to understand mobility, and understanding mobility requires attention to the movement of linguistic and other semiotic resources." When attempting to describe language practices characterized by mobility and flux, terms such as codemeshing (Canagarajah 2011), polylingual languaging (Jørgensen 2008), translanguaging (García 2009) and other similar concepts have proven useful. The underlying assumption behind these terms is that meaning-making is not limited to discrete languages (Blackledge and Creese 2017: 33).

With this introduction and with the different contributions of this special issue, we aim to contribute to the rethinking of applied linguistics in workplace and professional communication by focusing on situations characterized by mobility and flux.

3 Overview of the contributions

Empirically, the studies in this special issue cover both the private sector and the public sector. First, three articles on the public sector are presented, followed by three articles on the private sector.

Salla Kurhila, Lari Kotilainen and Inkeri Lehtimaja study how the category of L2 learner is openly topicalised and handled in the interaction of workplace meetings in a NGO in Finland. The flux of this setting is mainly related to a high turnover of staff with differing competencies in the relevant languages Finnish and Russian (and partly English), in a setting where language choice for meetings is not pre-ordained but often negotiated during the actual meetings. A consequence of the frequent occurrence of new employees is that everyone has to update their knowledge about the language competencies of others, which makes explicit mentioning of language competencies necessary. Moreover, the organization has the ambition to constitute a good environment for language development. The study shows how topicalization of being a language learner can be conducted a) with respect, when the language learner is prepared for it, and in an informal or humorous manner, or b) in a way that puts the language learner off her guard. This study argues that a work life characterized by flexibility concerning employment and language choice should take into account how to respectfully speak about the efforts, problems, and achievements of language learners.

Gunilla Jansson examines three evangelical churches in Sweden and how they respond to the needs of migrants under the changing conditions of globalization. The migrants in the study have many different languages. The analysis shows how the professionals of the churches in multimodal interaction with the migrants create spaces for belonging, that is, a common ground for the migrants and for themselves as representatives of Sweden. Language and languages are present here in several ways: the interaction is taking place in language classes, language is sometimes topicalised, and languages are used as means for communication in a way that Janson refers to as translanguaging. The professional ambitions behind these interactions are exemplified by interviews showing that empathy and the Christian values are guiding the work to include migrants in Swedish society. The role of professionals in enterprises such as churches in a world of increasing migration is highlighted in this study.

Theresa Lillis offers a situated account of everyday professional social work writing. She investigates this writing in terms of the material conditions and the discoursal and rhetorical complexity of the writing. The paper focuses on "critical moments" (after Candlin 1987) and "rich points"(Agar 1994, 2006), that is, moments when aspects of a text are troublesome in some manner. Lillis shows that these critical moments offer insights into key problems of social work writing, especially the tensions around professional voice and discourse. She argues for an articulation of professional social work writing that takes account of the dialogic nature of language. Specific ways in which social work practices can be regarded as being in flux are described in three levels. The first two levels of flux are the contested professional status of social work, and the shift towards contemporary social work practice as writing-intensive. These first two levels are presented as contextual aspects necessary for understanding the third level of flux, namely the challenges and tensions involved in the written entextualisation of meaning.

Pilvi Heinonen, Jarkko Niemi and Timo Kaski examine remote sales interactions in Finnish business-to-business sales meetings where a sales person delivers a software solution demonstration to a prospective customer via a computer screen. In sales work, the salesperson's core aim is to co-create value for the customer by engaging them in a joint dialogue where both participants actively take part in formulating a solution. In technology-mediated environments, this kind of value-oriented selling becomes more challenging due to the video-mediated visual connection. The article shows how the technological resources play a key role in organizing the remote sales interaction, as the participants draw on local material affordances and employ novel interactional practices during remote sales interaction. The article contributes to our knowledge about the way technology-mediated environments change the conventions of institutional and professional encounters.

Riikka Nissi and Heidi Hirsto investigate how the shift to the knowledge and innovation economy has created new sites for the commodification of language and communication in the context of organizational consulting. By using rhetorical discourse analysis as a method, they examine how consultant-led training activities present the role of language and communication in changing working life. Their results show how the activities factualize the transformation of work and the centrality of language in this transformation. Language and communication are conceptualized as key elements of professional competence and resources for organizational improvement and success. The authors conclude that the training programs can be regarded both as indicators and vehicles for social change, and they discuss how such training programs can be regarded as spaces where the new worlds of work are discursively construed.

Mona Blåsjö and Carla Jonsson examine digital text sharing in contemporary workplaces where communication is often mediated by changing digital systems that urge professionals to decide how to integrate the systems with work processes and knowledge management, and how to adjust to new routines. For data, they use ethnographic observations and interviews with commercial Swedish companies going through organizational and technological changes, and examine how the professionals in these companies construct digital text sharing metadiscursively. The article shows that the combination of digital text sharing and technological and organizational change are related to problems and potential risks. This article advances our previous understandings about the relationships between digital text sharing and work-life literacy as well as change, agency and power. It also shows how individuals and institutions engage in an enhanced reflexivity on issues of power and agency in a changing society where common practices are dissolved and new ones emerge as a result of rapid technological and organizational changes.

Overall, these articles reveal the everyday consequences of a changing work life for people working in various sectors, such as the performance and negotiation of language competencies and professional roles in a world where work identities relate persons to society, influencing their agency and participation. To support participation, inclusion, and language development in times of global and technological flux, organizations may create communicative spaces such as certain types of conversations and digital tools; the articles also demonstrate the ideals and norms behind such ambitions and activities. Other dimensions of dynamics and change include the dissolution of the boundaries between work/non-work roles and practices as well as various ways to approach the changes in themselves: who is in charge of these changes, and how can employees act within the circumstances imposed by the changes? The tendencies presented in the following articles, as well as the research overview above, indicate that the move towards a greater diversity in foci, research issues and methods are likely to be reinforced in a diverse, mobile and society in flux. The ambition of this special issue is to contribute to such a development of contemporary and future research on workplace communication.

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