Abs-258
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Professional discourse and corpora

Format: The colloquium will include an introduction, four papers and time for audience discussion:

Introduction: 10 minutes

4 papers: 20 minutes each

Questions and discussion: 30 minutes (2-3 minutes after each paper and 15 minutes for general discussion)

One of the most exciting developments in corpus linguistics over the past decade has been the growth of smaller, specialized corpora of professional communication, whether spoken, written or multimodal. Such corpora allow the fine-grained analysis of linguistic items and features as they occur in their particular professional environments. This colloquium consists of four papers, two of which will focus on spoken professional discourse and two on written or electronically mediated discourse. The 'spoken' papers will show how corpora can be used in the analysis of two areas of communication more typically associated with discourse analysis than corpus linguistics, namely narratives and intercultural communication. Similarly, the 'written' papers discuss profession-specific language in financial services, engineering and health communication. The four papers will raise several issues of import in professional communication, such as face work, obligation, problem-solving, genre, culture and identity construction, and will show how corpora can provide a fresh perspective on discourse phenomena and contribute to a more robust description of professional discourse.

Paper 1: Signalling culture in professional spoken discourse

In intercultural communication, 'culture' is often used as a synonym for nationality. However, in professional intercultural communication, culture can also be framed in terms of national, professional, and institutional memberships, with language constituting particular face concerns, goals, practices and identities, and with nationality arguably being the least relevant variable. This paper analyses texts from a one million word corpus of authentic business meetings (CANBEC , Handford 2010), and other recordings*, showing how selected statistically significant interpersonal features, such as pronouns and modals, may signal cultural differences in the unfolding discourse. The paper will also show how certain items, such as place deictics, may be 'key' in one professional culture, such as the construction industry, but not in others. The paper therefore attempts to show how charges of circularity in describing discourse as 'intercultural' can be addressed through the combination of corpora and contextual information.

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Paper 2: Oral narratives in professional discourse

Oral narratives in professional discourse fulfil a number of functions, such as identity construction (Holmes 2005), sharing knowledge (Orr 1990) or face work (Vasquez 2009). As such narratives unfold in time, they lend themselves most readily to a close turn-by-turn analysis. Investigating narratives from a corpus perspective, where the focus is on recurring lexical and phraseological features, thus poses a particular challenge.

This paper examines phraseologies in workplace narratives in the CANBEC Corpus, and examines their role across different professional contexts. For example, certain 'chunks' often introduce hypothetical narratives or (hypothetical) reported speech. Such narratives are of particular interest within professional discourse, as they frequently occur in the context of problem-solving - a core activity within professional discourse (Koester 2006, Handford 2010). The paper thus explores the contribution of a corpus perspective to the analysis of oral narratives and the role these play within professional discourse.

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Paper 3: Profession-specific phraseologies

This paper uses two profession-specific corpora compiled with the help of professionals in the financial services and the engineering sectors in Hong Kong. The corpora are the 7.3m Hong Kong Financial Services Corpus and the 9.2m-word Hong Kong Engineering Corpus (both are available at http://www.engl.polyu.edu.hk/RCPCE/).

The focus of this paper is on identifying phraseologies which are profession-specific in the sense of either being unique to, or more frequently found in, financial services or engineering texts. While there are indeed profession-specific phraseologies across the corpora as a whole which can be classified as register-specific, the study shows that there are profession-specific phraseologies in the two corpora which are genre-specific. The paper, therefore, also has implications for the ways in which studies of phraseology can be used to uncover the aboutness of register-specific corpora, genres-specific corpora and individual texts to help us better understand the language use of different professional communities.

Acknowledgements

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Paper 4: Advice in email health communication

This paper examines how corpus linguistic methods can be harnessed in analysing health communication. Focusing on electronic health discourse, we examine patterns and commonalities in the linguistic routines of young people when formulating health concerns to professionals online. The past decade has seen a proliferation of opportunities to use the internet for health related

advice and information, and many new sites provide opportunities for users to construct identities, formulate problems and seek solutions concerning health related issues.

The paper reports on a study of a one million word corpus of emails sent to a UK-based website - the Teenage Health Freak website - a health forum tailored to the needs of young people to seek advice anonymously from health professionals. Our interrogation of the email data aims to demonstrate how corpus analysis is able to reveal micro patterns of communication (such as personal attitudes towards and beliefs about health and illness), as well as macro discoursal patterns that potentially reflect broader cultural and economic trends in contemporary society: in particular the phenomenon of psychiatrization, the process whereby emotional complaints, once considered to fall within the scope of everyday experience, are perceived as pathological and hence susceptible to medical intervention.

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References

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Holmes, J. (2005). Story-telling at work: a complex discursive resource for integrating personal, professional and social identities. Discourse Studies 7 (6): 671-700.

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Orr, J. (1990). Sharing knowledge: celebrating identity: War stories and community memory among service technicians. In D.S. Middleton and D. Edwards (Eds), Collective Remembering, 169-189

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