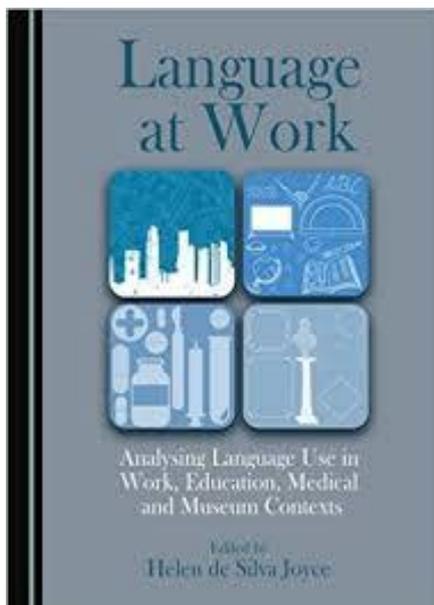# Language at Work: Analysing Language Use in Work, Education, Medical and Museum Contexts

Edited by Helen de Silva Joyce

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Review by Erik Castello*

The volume *Language at Work* explores the language used in a variety of workplace contexts ranging from call centres through secondary schools and hospitals to museums. Written, spoken and/or multimodal texts are analysed, with a view to investigating how professionals communicate with their colleagues, costumers, students, patients or visitors. The majority of the thirteen contributions concern private or public contexts in Australia. Eleven of them draw on the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and make extensive reference to Michael Halliday's work as well as to that of scholars working within the SFL tradition. Two studies adopt altogether different methodological approaches, while others combine SFL with other methods, including Conversation Analysis, Language Testing and Ethnographic and Literacy Studies. The book consists of four parts. Part 1 refers to three different workplace contexts, Part 2 to education contexts, Part 3 to medical contexts and Part 4 to museum contexts.

Part 1 starts off with Jane Lockwood's study of how personnel is recruited by call centres in various parts of Asia to provide services to bank customers who live in English-speaking countries. It reports on the development and revision of the procedures followed to assess the candidates' level of English and communication skills. The author first describes the *Business Performance Language Assessment System* (BUPLAS), which incorporates a set of criteria that focus on linguistic, interactional and strategic aspects of communication. This assessment system was inspired by the SFL view of language, viz. a functional rather

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than a structural one, and by research on Language Testing (Jacoby and McNamara 1999). She then goes on to explain how the language testing team organised focused group discussions with Subject Matter experts, with the aim of evaluating the quality of the procedures and eventually improving them. The result of this process was a re-weighting of the assessment criteria, according to which more importance is given to domains such as "business solutioning," "discourse capability" and "interactive and strategic capability" than to lexicogrammatical accuracy, pronunciation, stress and intonation.

Elizabeth A. Thomson investigates the role of banter, i.e. playfully teasing language, in the everyday talk of Australian Defence personnel. She draws on Eggins and Slade's (1997) model to analyse conversational moves involving about thirty dyads of culturally and linguistically diverse military personnel (e.g. female, Aboriginal, LGBTI people and people with a disability). She looks for consistent patterns of selection in dialogic exchanges that the Defence members recounted during semi-structured interviews. The author first distinguishes between categories of "player moves" and "non-player moves" and then provides a more fine-grained classification of each by further dividing them into three and two categories respectively. Her findings suggest that banter has the potential to enable affiliation and acceptance in the community as well as to transcend rank and promote team cohesion.

Theo Van Leeuwen, Ken Tann and Suzanne Benn present a study of texts produced as part of the collaboration/partnership between the non-government organization (NGOs) WWF-Australia and Insurance Australia Group and between WWF-Australia and the Australian Gas Light Company. The authors carry out "recontextualisation" and "resemiotisation" analyses as well as SFL-informed investigations of the partners' different understandings, ideologies, interests and moral evaluations (van Leeuwen 2008) and of the way they reconcile them in common documents for stakeholders and in joint publications. The "transitivity" analyses (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Martin and Rose 2007) they carry out reveal that in these texts actions and social actors are variously represented, that process types, process nouns and nominalisation are carefully used and that human agents are strategically mentioned or omitted. Furthermore, the partners' joint actions against climate change are mainly represented as mental and verbal processes (e.g. *recognize, urge*) rather than material ones, which implies that other institutions should undertake them (e.g. the Australian Government). Their investigation thus suggests that partners do not need to agree on the reasons for action, but only on the actions to perform.

The Chapter by Sally Humphrey and Lucy Macnaught, the first one in Part 2, concerns the *Metalanguage for Embedding Literacies in the Key Learning Areas* (MELK) project, which aimed at helping secondary-school teachers develop their knowledge about language and metalanguage and integrate it into their instruction and feedback to students. It involved about thirty-five Australian Technology and Applied Sciences teachers who responded to a survey and collaborated with researchers on the operationalization of the *4X4 Metalanguage Toolkit*, a framework based on the four SFL metafunctions that explains genres by unpacking meanings related to the whole text through "phases" across paragraphs and sentences to single words. The project focused on the methods of "deconstruction" and "joint construction," which should provide literacy support to students before their independent "construction" (writing) (Rose and Martin 2012). The results indicate that after the professional learning program most teachers developed their metalanguage and started to provide feedback to students on aspects concerning the discourse semantic stratum at the paragraph level rather than at the word level. Yet professional development is a long-term process, and more work needs to be done in this area.

Lesley Farrel and Ken Tann report on the development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum, which attempts to produce a new architecture of schooling as well as to influence the institutional practices of teachers and students at a national level. The authors conduct a linguistic analysis of the Curriculum as part of the *Peopling Educational Policy (PEP)* project and draw on Institutional Ethnography and SFL methods to do so. Institutional Ethnography allows them to critically approach the documents that govern roles and actions surrounding the Curriculum, while the SFL model (Martin and White 2005; Tann 2010) offers them more detailed and explicit analytic tools. The authors exemplify their approach through the analysis of a selection of communiqués published by authorities and councils, and illustrate how nominalisation is often used to elide actors. Overall, their textual analyses show that the teachers' professional knowledge, expertise and autonomy are at stake in the negotiations, yet the debates are not always explicit.

Susan Hood and Patricia Maggiora zoom in on a particular law lecture given at the University of Technology, Sydney, and investigate how spoken language, body language and movement through the lecturing space

contribute to structuring discourse. The authors adopt an SFL-informed multimodal approach to the study of this specific EAP genre (Hood 2016), and identify cases of repeated co-occurrences of choices in verbal and body language, i.e. "couplings." They suggest that the lecturer's movements and position can enhance the meaning potential available to the students in the lecture theatre during the various phases of a lecture, e.g. the phases of disciplinary knowledge, pedagogic interaction and storytelling. Consequently, in higher education live lecturing still appears to be valuable and should not be uncritically replaced by online-only teaching.

Susan Feez investigates the literacy demands placed on Australian secondary school teachers and on their literacy practice (Moon 2014). The study involved four teachers of various subjects who kept a "literacy diary" over a two-week period after being involved in a professional learning project with an emphasis on general and discipline-specific pedagogical literacies. The analysis of their logs reveals that much of the teachers' reading and writing concerns administrative tasks (e.g. e-mail exchanges, drafting student assessment schedules), lesson preparation (e.g. reviewing syllabus documents, marking student work), activities supporting and assisting students and keeping abreast with technological changes. All the teachers agreed that their working days should be less "fragmented" and that more opportunities should be provided to both teachers and students to engage in sustained, high-order and specialised literacy activities.

The contribution by Diana Slade, Jack Pun, Graham Lock and Suzanne Eggins opens up Part 3 and examines the issue of potential points of miscommunication between doctors and patients. Drawing on the concept of genre as developed within the SFL tradition and on generic structure in particular (Eggins 2004; Eggins et al. 2016), they analyse the transcripts of the medical consultations that took place at the point of discharge of two Cantonese-speaking patients in a Hong Kong hospital emergency department. One of the patients was satisfied with the consultation while the other was not. The discourse analysis reveals that in the latter case communication was at risk at some points of the interaction, i.e. at "potential risk points," and that such risks were either interpersonal – due to a dissatisfying doctor-patient relationship – or informational – due to the unclear medical information provided. Analyses such as the one presented in this article can help identify specific points of vulnerability in unfolding medical consultations and offer insights into how doctors should best provide information to patients about their condition and follow-up care.

In the following Chapter, Suzanne Eggins explores the discourse strategies that senior clinicians adopt to informally introduce junior doctors to the shared professional routines and practices of Australian public hospitals. She combines Conversation Analysis (Liddicoat 2011) with SFL methods to analyse three transcribed interactions involving three senior doctors, an intern and two registrars. Her findings reveal that the interactions represent three ways of "interactional on-the-job teaching," which she calls "demonstrated," "declared" and "elicited" teaching. In the first interaction, the senior participant asks the younger colleague pedagogic questions for which he already knows the answers. In the second, the experienced practitioner purposefully interrupts the ongoing exchange to clarify some aspects, while in the third one he asks the junior colleague for missing information. They exemplify three different teaching styles, which adapt to the junior doctors' assumed level of knowledge, the material contexts and the immediate goals of the interactions. They also represent possible ways in which the experienced practitioners "think out loud" with junior staff, and in so doing "hand over" their clinical experience to them.

The last article in Part 3 is co-authored by Suzanne Eggins, Naya Cominos and John Walsh, who compare two "handover" interactions using the analytical lens provided by SFL, viz. "grammatical metaphor," nominalisation and "attribution," and socio-functional linguistics (Fairclough 1995). During both events a clinician handed over information about and responsibility for a patient to his/her colleagues, and made reference to multiple external sources to construct multi-voiced explanations for his/her patients' conditions. In the former interaction, the patient was suffering from a physical disease, and during the meeting information was often derived from medical technology (e.g. "x-rays") through the process of grammatical metaphor and from the patient herself through the process of nominalisation. In the latter interaction, by contrast, the patient was mentally ill and the clinician used nominalisation to represent the patient as the possessor of the illness (e.g. "having a depression") rather than as the senser of it. On both occasions the patient was elided. These and other findings suggest that doctors working for Australian public hospitals should pursue a more patient-centred communication.

Part 4 begins with Jacqueline Widin and Keiko Yasukawa's Chapter. The authors critically examine the literacy practices and expectations of non-traditional museum visitors and of museum staff. Following the frameworks of New Literacy Studies (Barton 2007) and New Museology (Vergo 1989), they collected data by interviewing staff at an Australian museum and by observing and interviewing two groups of visitors to the same museum whom they deemed to be atypical in terms of linguistic background and education. Differences emerged between the museum design team's expectations and the way visitors actually engaged with the exhibition. The multimodal literacy embedded in the exhibition proved to be complex and textually dense, which leads the researchers to conclude that the team overlooked the visitors' degree and type of proficiency.

Jennifer Blunden shifts the attention to museum texts and reports on research she conducted at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and at two Australian museums. Drawing on SFL-inspired social semiotic theory, *Knowledge about Language* (KAL) pedagogy (Christie 2012) and museum studies (Ravelli 2006), she analyses the use of grammatical metaphor in two spoken texts about the same paintings, viz. an extract from an audioguide and one from a guided tour led by a volunteer. The former text turns out to be richer in instances of nominalisation than the latter, which adds to the text's density and abstraction and to the visitors' difficulty in understanding it. Subsequently, the author describes how she used these texts to work with museum staff in the attempt to make them aware of the impact that museum texts can have on visitors.

In the last Chapter, Helen Whitty uses insights from Literacy Studies (Burnett et al. 2012), Material Culture (Miller 2005) and Material Semiotics (Fox and Alldred 2014) to discuss aspects of the fieldwork that she conducted in two museums in Tasmania. She focuses on how non-mainstream visiting families engaged with the objects and texts displayed in the museums as well as on the technology used there. She observes that parents and children often approached the museum place "creatively," and concludes that museums should be considered "performative spaces where assemblages of families, objects and texts are simultaneously demonstrating and generating literacies."

As shown by this review, the majority of the studies that make up Helen de Silva Joyce's edited volume are mainly qualitative in nature and use SFL as the main theoretical framework. Four of them draw specifically on the concepts of grammatical metaphor and nominalisation to explore the written and spoken language used in various workplaces. Van Leeuwen et al. looks at their use in texts produced by non-government organisations; Farrel and Tann in texts concerning the implementation of the Australian Curriculum; Eggins et al. in medical handovers; and Blunden in an audioguide and a guided tour. Five of them, by contrast, complement the study of genre with Conversation (discourse) Analysis. Thompson combines them to study teasing in a Defence context; Hood and Maggiora a university lecture; Slade et al. examine cases of miscommunication between doctors and patients; Eggins the discourse strategies adopted by senior clinicians; and Eggins and Cominos handover interactions. The recurrent focus on the concepts of grammatical metaphor, nominalisation and genre suggests that these are promising "heuristic" concepts which are worth exploring in future research. Furthermore, the frequent combination of SFL methods with Conversation (discourse) Analysis tools indicates that such composite methodological approaches are successful and should be pursued.

To sum up, the volume offers a selection of inspiring studies that explore language at work. They attempt to explain how language is shaped by the workplace contexts in which it is used and how language itself shapes these contexts. They illustrate how (qualitative) research can be insightfully conducted on this type of language and provide their readers with ideas and bibliographical references (see also the small selection of works cited in this review) for future investigations grounded on the SFL model or on mixed methods.

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