

BOOK REVIEWS:

Research and Practice in Professional Discourse.

Ed Christopher Candlin

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This hefty volume serves as proceedings from a conference on professional discourse held in Hong Kong, presumably in the year 2000. It contains two sections, each the size of a normal book: First, a section of seven invited papers, introduced by the editor Christopher Candlin and discussed and summarized by a ninth contributor; and secondly, seventeen papers from the conference organized around the provenance of their professional material: Health and social care, the academy (including student writing on engineering, physics, the law, etc.), literature and education, media, and business.

Not so long ago, there were volumes with titles like “Discourse in the Professions”, and they dealt with law, medicine or banking. This is no longer the case: “professional” means any kind of work, be it as a doctor, a journalist, a manager or a teacher of geography, and “discourse” is used about the interaction between social actors and the language they use to accomplish their actions, from a array of overlapping angles. Practically every branch of text and language study is represented, among them textlinguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, pragmatics, semantics, rhetoric, semiotics, genre theory, ethnomethodology and Critical Discourse Analysis.

For anyone interested in meta-theory of discourse, or rather, in the kind of discourse analysis that remains close to text and talk, as opposed to the sociological branch, the first section offers an excellent opportunity to compare approaches. The contributors are Vijay Bhatia, John Swales and Charles Bazerman, all of whom will

be best known to scholars of *Fachsprache* for their work on professional genres, Srikant Sarangi (best known for work in interactional sociolinguistics), Gu Yueguo, Jim Martin (functional grammar and professional registers) and Ruth Wodak (Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA). The perceptive discussion is conducted by Tom Huckin, and the following summary follows his outline.

Huckin sees four large themes in the seven papers. The first of these is “dynamism”, i.e. the mixing, colonization and hybridization of genres and professional discourses; schemas become fallible, disciplines develop in the light of each other, all text is intertext. There is also a macro aspect: Wodak notices that decisions in cumbersome institutions are increasingly being overtaken by dynamic, flexible international commissions, whose discourses of inclusion and exclusion are the constitutive elements of political communication. And while on theory, Martin has felt a need to create a response to the widespread and occasionally shrill criticism of CDA; this he endearingly calls Positive Discourse Analysis, PDA, to be used for studying reconciliation and integration.

Analysis of register, textualization and rhetoric in the several chapters is the second characteristic. Each approach pays attention to the lexico-grammatical layer of their material, both as a reflection of the practice in which it occurs and as jointly constitutive of that practice, and they address the question of readers/hearers. For example, Wodak asks a key figure behind the committee report that she has followed, “Who reads these reports?” She receives the kind of evasive answer that makes one wonder if the exercise was worthwhile.

Thirdly, Huckin notes the high level of reflexivity. The authors query the way they go about their analysis, and this is where readers interested in the development of discourse theory may gather information about the purposes and changes that each well-established author now sees as relevant to his or her method.

Lastly, there is the aspect of interactivity – of field research in professional practices and the interesting question of observer status. For instance, Sarangi clearly becomes a participant when he discusses clinical observation with his medical practitioners after their talk with patients. Thus the context, setting and situated activity are now major concerns in textual analysis – the most important change, and in my view, progress, from the single texts and conversations that we used to study for their contributions to genre or lexicon or register.

The second section of the book contain traditional conference papers, mostly reporting data from a limited study. While all papers are informative in their own right, it remains a question if the papers would not have been seen to better advantage in journals dedicated either to their approach, like *Discourse and Society*, or to their subject matter, like *Journal of Business Communication* for business, *Journal of Educational Research* for university writing, etc. For the authors whose work I am familiar with, it seems true that the work reported here is also dealt with in their other publications.

Nevertheless, the selection represents a cross-section that could point the way for interested readers in a number of directions, such as “What can discourse analysts offer health professionals?” (Sally Candlin), “What new interaction is found when students use multimedia teaching resources – and why not?” (Bernard McKenna), or “What differences are found when native and non-native speakers use e-mail in international corporations?” (Catherine Nickerson). Certainly it is encouraging to find so much work that sends linguists out in the workplace where discourse matters, and to see that their work matters to professional practitioners, too.
