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The Dissemination of Contemporary Knowledge in English

Genres, discourse strategies
and professional practices

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Introduction

Knowledge is an extremely complex phenomenon, as is the nature of discourse, and any investigation into the relationship between the two poses a not insignificant challenge for researchers in the linguistic sciences. For our present purposes, we shall adopt van Dijk's definition of knowledge (2003: 85) as "the consensual beliefs of an epistemic community". We shall also specify "knowledge dissemination" as the spread of knowledge within and across settings, with the expectation that the knowledge will be used conceptually, as learning, enlightenment, or the acquisition of new perspectives, attitudes and behaviours (Barba Navaretti *et al* 2010).

This volume brings together a series of studies on the nature of the dissemination of specialist knowledge in English, its various principles, conceptualizations, constructs and pragmatic dynamics, over a range of discourse genres: knowledge discourse is addressed to a number of audiences, expert and lay, in a variety of fields, legal, political, economic, institutional, academic, organizational and professional. The authors explore the use of language in the creation and diffusion of knowledge, in its transformation from being a mere repository of information, achieved through complex discursive processes. These processes use both general pragma-linguistic textual resources, and also derive from the communicative practices specific to the discourse communities in question.

Relatively small, original, specialized corpora have been constructed by the scholars for this purpose: oral, written and multimodal in type. These include European and British legislation on the regulation of electricity and the websites of the Big Six Energy Suppliers in the UK; corporate websites, on-line documents from The World Bank, UN Declarations, material from NGO organizations; research articles in medical journals; annual epidemiological reports issued by the E.U.

and the UK; the websites of two central banks, the Bank of England and the European Central Bank; internal organizational and corporate training and development webcast audio-conferences. The use of data retrieved from web 2.0 technologies is important in these investigations not so much for a study of the linguistic choices afforded and constrained by internet genres but for insight into the shaping of authorial purposes and their textual expression. In a time of "digital democratization", the distinctions between expert and non-specialist audiences, public and private communication domains, are becoming blurred. The demands, rights and obligations of the general public in the global knowledge-sphere are changing, informative texts are increasingly being drafted with interested "consumers" in mind, and consequently "strategic texts" are taking centre stage in research agendas. These are texts which offer a rethinking of the way in which knowledge is managed: how it is built, elaborated and distributed.

A wide variety of explanatory and analytical frameworks are represented by the studies contained here: corpus linguistics, making use of what is now considered standard electronic text-processing methodologies, is present in nearly all of the analyses. However, the work collected here might well be considered a contribution to CADS, corpus assisted discourse studies, using a range of theoretical constructs: critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, 2003) with its emphasis on the management of knowledge, ideologies and power issues, emerges strongly in several topics, the public right to water, for example. In another chapter, on medical research articles, Systemic Functional Linguistics models (Halliday 1994), together with quantitative methods, are directed towards an analysis of scientific, academic discourse. The social dimensions of discourse are also combined with cognitive frameworks, in the chapter on corporate training events, in order to better understand discourse processing, its comprehension and interpretation, through framing (Bateson 1954, Goffman 1974), scripting, and the attendant creation of shared knowledge.

Conversational analysis and narratology (Norrick 2000) are central explanatory fields of enquiry in several chapters. Interdiscursivity, intertextuality and intersubjectivity (Bakhtin 1981, Bhatia 2010) are also common threads running throughout, and are prominent in chapters

on domain-crossing, from law to business, for example, and the variation between differently-placed, institutional, textual sources. Accounts of multimodal discourse and the use of visual texts, in particular, in pedagogical communication, provide the theoretical anchor for another chapter.

The important paradigmatic change in approach, overall, is a move from a consideration of texts as isolates, and as the sole starting point for analysis, to a systematic, multi-layered description of contextualization and its embodiment in discursive structures, forms and patterns (Linnel 2009 and Wodak 2011 provide useful models).

These various theoretical orientations result in a wide range of research findings about the mapping of cognitive and socio-cultural meanings onto knowledge discourses. In more than half of the studies, the approach is contrastive, whereas the remaining ones are restricted to a single, specific field. In all cases, the focus is on the ways language shapes conceptualization and the co-construction of epistemological frameworks for specific modalities, audiences and interactions. Some generalizable discursive strategies, however, emerge over the collection of studies, related to the following:

•   (Re)contextualization: discourse is re-shaped and re-written for changing recipients with different purposes, and may reflect popularization or simplification of expert knowledge, or, on the other hand, switches between discourse communities, domains or fields.
•   Re-conceptualizations: the previous two sets of strategies also contribute to a re-working of cognitive representations and mental models, through re-framing and re-scripting, these representations constituting the intrinsic epistemological components of knowledge.
•   Trans-mediation and en-textualization: movement across different channels and modalities, from visual to oral modes, for example, which involves describable re-formulations and inter-textual affiliations.

The studies as a whole demonstrate the multi-levels of knowledge, its very varied typology, and its dynamic nature in ongoing co-construction,