

Speaking the same language

Director of the Institute of Applied Media Studies Professor Daniel Perrin considers the relevance of applied linguistics and communicative challenges to modern society...

From playing and learning right up to communication on the job and in public – we use language to understand and shape our world. Applied linguistics is perhaps best known in parts of the world for its work on language learning and teaching, but concerns itself more broadly with language and language use. It investigates repertoires of strategies that individuals or communities use, for example, in everyday life and at work, and then searches for ways to expand these repertoires through teaching and learning. In doing so, applied linguistics has developed sub-disciplines related to fields whose language use is socially significant and noticeably differs from language use in other fields.

Examples of such sub-disciplines include:

- Legal linguistics dealing with language use in law, where language creates legal obligation;
- Forensic linguistics dealing with language use in legal investigations and judicial practice, where language can yield alibis and evidence;
- Clinical linguistics dealing with language use in diagnosing and treating speech and communication disorders, where language can hinder interaction;
- Organisational linguistics dealing with language use in occupational settings, where language guides organisational processes of value creation;
- Media linguistics dealing with language use in media and public discourse, where language distributes knowledge.

So, why do applied linguists focus on certain fields of language use, such as professional domains? Why is it socially relevant to investigate language, identify language related problems and solve them? On a micro level, language use may be seen as linking linguistic units to produce or understand utterances. However, the way we express ideas in words and understand those words reflects the way we think and organise ourselves. People interact primarily through language. In technical terms, the situated activity of language use shapes and is shaped by an individual's sum of experiences, social settings such as families or workplaces, and contextual resources such as the cultures we live in and contribute to.

Thus, language is an interface to people's mental and societal worlds. Knowing how people speak helps us to understand them – and improving their repertoires of

language use means fostering their reflexivity and social agency. As concrete examples of the societal relevance of applied linguistics, three research projects deal with various challenges to modern society: language competence – specifically on promoting public understanding through organisational language awareness; multilingualism – specifically on monitoring translation to understand how people transfer information between languages; and language modes – specifically on understanding writing processes by modelling their phases.

Promoting public understanding

Public service broadcasting companies are among the most important broadcasting companies in Europe. In Switzerland, the public broadcaster, SRG SSR, also has the highest ratings. As a public service institution, SRG SSR has a federal, societal, cultural and linguistic mandate to fulfil: to promote social integration by promoting public understanding. 'In its programmes SRG SSR promotes understanding, coherence, and exchange among the parts of the country, linguistic communities, cultures, religions, and social groups...' (a translation of the programming mandate 2007, article 2, paragraph 2).

As a media enterprise, SRG SSR is subject to market and competitive forces. Losing audience would mean losing public importance. Therefore, the mandate presupposes that reaching the public will promote public understanding. In the project, the researchers investigate how those working for the broadcaster deal with the following tasks: fulfilling their public duty by providing programmes and items that contribute to the public debate and promote public understanding, while also actually reaching the public in an increasingly competitive media market, and finally, dealing with growing economic pressure and increasingly faster technological change.

In this project, ethnographic interviews with stakeholders, long-term video recordings of workplace conversations, and keystroke logs of writing processes in the newsroom are all considered. Installing cameras in the newsrooms and logging software on all workplace computers need careful preparation from both the psychological and technological perspectives. Because of the impositions that data collection imposes, all participants have to feel that they benefit from the findings of such a project.

In this case, the findings show that experienced journalists have tacit knowledge of how to manage the

balancing act between the demands of the public mandate and economic pressures. The necessary practices and approaches to solutions that develop during daily practice emerge according to the context and while dealing with critical situations.

The following conclusions could be drawn: the conditions for emergent solutions in news teams need to be systematically improved top-down, and the tacit knowledge involved systematically identified bottom-up and then made available to the whole organisation. Based on these recommendations, the stakeholders working in media policy, management, practice and research have set up follow-up activities for knowledge transformation, such as systematic organisational development, consulting, coaching and training.

Monitoring translation

Although English has become the accepted lingua franca of the business and research world, the need for well-trained professional translators has actually increased in recent years. Governments, too, expend significant resources on transferring information between languages (estimated at €1.1bn per year by EU institutions alone). Despite the obvious economic importance of translation work, research can scarcely keep pace with recent developments, especially into the use of electronic resources and the increasingly significant area of translation into a non-native language.

Translation products are the result of the interaction between societal expectations of how information should be transferred between languages, and translators' practices and competence that allow them to produce acceptable translations within temporal and economic constraints. It is clear that far more than just excellent proficiency in two languages is needed to translate effectively, but we are only beginning to understand how translation competence changes over time as translators gain experience and how such multilinguals manage to work efficiently between their languages.

In this project, we monitor professionals and students at various points in their careers as they translate at their workplaces. The monitoring is in the form of personal interviews, recordings of translation processes with screen capturing and eye-tracking software, comments about the processes by the translators, and analyses of the intermediate versions and final translation products.

Initial findings suggest that part of translation competence is the recognition of when and how to exploit internal resources and to compensate for limitations by referring to external resources. Metalinguistic awareness and information literacy have emerged as key indicators of translation competence, which has implications for training and professional development.

As we expand our corpus, we expect to release more expert knowledge, allowing inferences to be made about the practices and strategies that guide translation processes – the awareness that translators have of what they are doing and multilingual processing in general. The results should contribute to validating existing models of

translation competence and allow us to develop systemic measures to optimise education and training, translation workflow efficiency, and output quality.

Modelling writing phases

Writing is a key component of practically all domains of human endeavour. Through writing, we build up social networks, develop projects, inform colleagues and customers, and generate the basis for decisions. The quality of writing is often decisive for social resonance and professional success. Nevertheless, we still lack crucial knowledge about writing processes, knowledge that would form the basis of systematic writing education in pedagogic, academic and professional settings.

Thus far, writing has been described in the research literature as an interplay of situations, strategies, and phases – with phases being identifiable temporal procedural units with typical dominant writing actions such as 'formulating' or 'source reading'. Phases are recognised as essential for the success of writing processes. At the same time, most scientific approaches to writing base their phase concepts and descriptions on introspection or single case studies.

The methodology for a rigorous, objectively verifiable analysis of the structure of writing processes and therefore for an empirically testable explanation of the nature and interplay of phases in writing processes has not yet been developed. This is exactly what the research project outlined here aims to do: to explore and model writing phases based on statistical methodology, thus providing a solid foundation for good practice models of writing processes – a necessary condition for systematic education in writing.

This research project is based on one of the most extensive data collections of writing processes in natural settings. The data is available in a so-called time series format, which allows the use of particular statistical techniques beyond those normally associated with corpus linguistics. The dynamics of writing activities such as insertions or deletions can be analysed and related to background conditions such as the writing task and the experience of the writers.

Expected results will allow us to deduce empirically and theoretically-based models of good practice in writing processes in specific settings and systematically evaluate competence and progress in (professional) writing. Both are essential for the effective design of systematic writing courses, training and coaching. Practical deliverables of the project will include task and domain specific good practice models of writing processes.

For more information about applied linguistics see www.aila.info.



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