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**Is talking work doing work?**

**Jo Angouri and Ifigenia Machili**

**Introduction**

The importance of communication in the workplace is now considered a truism. In scholarly and lay business literature it is normatively associated with profitability, productivity, team building, and client relationships (e.g. McQuerrey 2017). A detailed treatment of what this actually means and how we can better understand the way we interact in the world of work did not preoccupy researchers until about the '70s. Linguists, and particularly Sociolinguists, turned a firm eye on the workplace, initially as a domain of human activity and the new field, under Workplace Sociolinguistics, grew exponentially in the '80s and the '90s. At the same time, scholars in other fields, and particularly in International Business, also started raising questions about language in multilingual workplace settings. The two fields, however, did not interact and there is, still, little synergy between them in the present day (Angouri and Piekari 2018). This chapter is firmly within the Sociolinguistics discipline, although we hope the issues raised will bear relevance to a wide range of readers.

Workplace Sociolinguists have argued that *talking work is doing work* and interpersonal or relational interaction is not only prevalent but inseparable from transactional or task-based talk. In the fluid business world, organizations compete for global talent, employees operate in a multilingual, diverse and highly competitive environment and are called to work in and across linguistic, national, professional and geographical boundaries. People in different positions, with varying backgrounds, expertise and years of experience carry out their professional roles by negotiating “norms” which are different to their own and their own ways of doing things. Further to this, any workspace is a political setting where power relationships are at play. In this context the management of mundane daily events require a handling of complexity which is often unacknowledged. We discuss here one of the most common tasks in the workplace, the reaching of decisions and we draw on data from business emails. We pay special attention to the way interactants negotiate formality and use of global and local languages as they project, claim and resist group membership.

### **The field of Workplace Sociolinguistics at a glance**

Sociolinguists turned to the workplace as a place which could be used to test some claims from current theories analyzing how language is used to express politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) and theories of Conversational Analysis. Similar to Conversational Analysts, Sociolinguists also became preoccupied with detailed analysis of interactions, and the Interactional Sociolinguistics approach provided the theoretical framework and methodological tools for studying interactions within their immediate and wider sociocultural context. Unlike Conversational Analysts, however, who primarily focused on the sequential organization of conversation in professional encounters, Interactional Sociolinguists sought

to interpret the situation through the participants' eyes as well as on the researcher's understanding of the context. Interactional Sociolinguistics became a dominant model in Workplace Sociolinguistics.

Rather than working with a priori assumptions about how things work, Workplace Sociolinguists look at interactions as an ongoing process of negotiation, where participants infer what their interlocutors intend to convey and re/align their uptake. In doing so they perpetuate or challenge existing social structures and power hierarchies. As the workplace is a site of conflict where power relationships are continually challenged and changing (Wodak 2012), sociolinguists explore the situated nature of meaning in interpersonal relations as they are formed and negotiated in situ. One of the first systematic attempts to discuss power and politeness in the workplace was Holmes (1995), as part of the New Zealand Language in the Workplace project. Others looked into the way formality is used to negotiate decisions at work (e.g. Erickson 1999). More recent discourse analyses of business emails and meetings still reveal that language is a tool employed strategically by employees and acquires meaning within the interpersonal and organizational context of their interactions (e.g. Bremner 2012; Gimenez 2002; Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta 2014).

Over the years, the field has moved from looking at the workplace as a site for data collection to broader phenomena around commodification and marketization of society and human capital. Currently the field is preoccupied with questions around workplace integration and global centres and peripheries that are prominent in the negotiation of power structures and resources. Particularly, in the current political context "work" becomes a site separating those who are a "resource" from those who are a "burden". This highlights the need for further research into the practices of teams in different professional settings and the implications of

training particularly for work-related language use. We return to these issues in the conclusions of the chapter. Let us now turn to the business email.

### **The ever-dominant business email**

Since their uniform adoption in the world of business around the 1990s, emails have become the dominant means of communication. Popular literature suggests that on average employees receive 120 emails every day and the daily number of business emails received and sent is 124.5 billion (Lyncova 2019).

Their high frequency is unquestionable and they have penetrated all levels and functions of any organization using computer-based information systems. Their ease of use and access and multiple addressability to geographically dispersed teams enables all parties to share information or participate in the resolution of complex issues. The information flow becomes regularized and procedures are standardized. Collective decisions are made faster, the cost is reduced and organizational productivity is enhanced. Further through their CCing function, messages to employees at various hierarchical levels, with different expertise and agendas can be stored and retrieved establishing accountability in both vertical and horizontal communication. Emails are used to carry out everyday procedural tasks and more complex issues for various purposes and agendas. Although they have attracted some attention in sociolinguistic research in relation to their variable linguistic features (Gains 1999; Crystal 2006), emails are still under-studied particularly given their frequency and significance. In a recent paper, we argued that their primary function largely relies on the organizational community where they are employed (Machili 2014b).

In addition to their technical traits, emails also afford important social characteristics, which have spawned a heated debate about the depersonalizing nature of email in informational and communication technology circles (Lucas 1998). On the one hand, email fosters an, allegedly, egalitarian environment by filtering out social status cues. On the other, email has its own mechanisms to enable maintenance and negotiation of power asymmetries at work. In recent work (Machili, Angouri and Harwood 2019), we have shown how users manage the system to index and negotiate power asymmetries. Although the CCing facility, for example, enables participants from various hierarchical levels and professions to participate in decision making equally, it is strategically used by participants to include and/or exclude others from the chain and shift between active and passive positions. The structural elements of emails (e.g. absence or presence of greetings), variability of linguistic features (e.g. formality, politeness) and purposes (formal-informal, transactional-relational, personal-professional) and CCing facility are used differently by people in and across different organizations, departments and levels to mark status differences and/or build rapport thus fostering an egalitarian or non-egalitarian environment depending on the local context (Bremner 2006; Machili 2014b).

Emails are also ideal for studying the construction and negotiation of interpersonal relationships as employees engage in decision making. In addition to the more stable power asymmetries in relation to hierarchy, established roles and years of experience, situated forms of power are formed and negotiated in discourse. This can, and at times does, create space for a renegotiation of power balance at work; junior members can, in principle, check on their senior colleagues when copied in, outsiders can claim membership by virtue of whom they know, newcomers can *do* power over old-timers because of their expertise.

Evidently this negotiation is reflected and strategically enacted linguistically through variations in style and choice of global and local languages according to what is considered appropriate within the interactants' immediate interpersonal and wider organizational context. So workplace discourse becomes a set of resources drawn upon for the enactment of professional roles and identities in daily transactional interactions. Task oriented interaction becomes inseparable from relational talk as employees make decisions on organizational matters and this talk in turn "makes" the organization. "The organization emerges in and through the discourse of the interactants" (Angouri and Locher 2017: 221). We now turn to the core activity we will be discussing through the data, Decision Making.

### **Decision Making (DM) at work**

Addressing (complex) problems and reaching decisions is daily practice for professionals. DM has been extensively studied over the years and organization DM and behavioural DM models have been suggested in relevant literature (e.g. Panagiotou 2008; Yeh and Chang 2009).

It is not until recently however that sociolinguistic research turned its eye to the complex architecture of decisions and shown the importance of interaction. As Huisman (2001: 84) aptly puts it, "there appears to be a wall between theories of decision making and the features of the actual interactional procedures through which organization shaper their future".

This work has shown that DM is far from linear; it is a complex process where it is not often possible to identify what comprises a decision and the moment it is taken (Boden 1994; Halvorsen 2013; Sarangi and Roberts 1999), and it is generally viewed as the process where

participants jointly construct the formulation of a state of affairs and through further assessment and formulation commit to future states of affairs (Huisman 2001: 75). So what “counts” as decision is difficult to define (Marra 2003; Kim and Angouri 2019). It is equally difficult to identify the moment when a decision is reached. Although analytically decisions and problems can be studied separately, we consider them here and in earlier work to be interrelated (Angouri 2012; Machili 2014b) Looking into DM from a sociolinguistic perspective involves exploring the context where a negotiation of issues that are ratified as problems in an organization trigger commitment to a set of “future actions”. Although DM has been studied in meetings (Holmes and Marra 2004), one of the core events where organizations (re)define their priorities for the future, there is little sociolinguistic research on the role of business email for DM. Emails, however, also provide a prime space for making and negotiating decisions, particularly given their versatility in terms of time and speed.

DM is the product of interactional processes, engaging people from different disciplines and areas of expertise, from distinguishable hierarchical levels within and across different organizations. It is a linguistic and social process where the participants *position themselves in relation to competing agendas for future action*. DM is highly dependent on the norms of the particular organization, which means that practice cannot be easily extrapolated but patterns can be usefully compared across settings. We discuss this further in the light of a small dataset we analyse to illustrate the points made here. We focus on the way collective decisions are taken in an example email chain (Figure 2.1); the use of global and local languages and negotiation of formality constitute the primary considerations of the analysis.

### **Unpacking emails**



In this section we discuss how language is used strategically in DM. We posit that an examination of formal and informal linguistic features and global and local languages can shed light to the way employees negotiate their professional roles and relations. In practice, this results in ways to *do* power, to include and/or exclude access to DM as employees participate in collective problem solving. We base the discussion on our analysis of the data supplemented with the participants' views as these were expressed in discourse-based interviews (for a discussion of the methodology see Machili 2014b). We look at greetings, reference (use of *I* and *we*), and degree of explicitness in relation to formality, use of German and Greek as local languages and English as the global Lingua Franca (the language understood by all members of the organization).

<Figure 2.1 about here>

Specifically, the use of *we* is associated with formality as it is employed to represent an organization when *I* indexes more personalized style in business emails (see Machili 2014b). A high degree of explicitness has been linked to formality while implicitness (i.e. shared contextual implications mainly through the use of pronouns) with informality (Heylighen and Dewale 1999). Greetings with last names and signatures index formal style while a lack of greetings and more personalized salutations like *hi*, *bye*, *take care* index informality (Rice 1997; Gains 1999; Crystal 2006).

All emails were written in English except (4), which was in German and (7) which was in Greek. The idiomatic translation in English is provided below. At the firm's request anything that could identify the firm, products or the participants themselves has been replaced by

pseudonyms and participants have given their consent to use of their emails and interview data.

*Figure 2.1*

Context: The email chain provided here concerns the handling of a complaint, made by Maria, sales manager of a particular line of diagnostic equipment in PharmaMed (a pharmaceutical company based in Greece) about not being informed by BioMedical co (BM), their company-supplier in Germany, about the recall of ASTRA (medical equipment), a line of products she was being supplied with and selling to the Greek market. The complaint is addressed to Niklas, a BM high executive, responsible for the product sales in Europe. The chain is copied to all relevant parties – her two bosses (Andrew and Koliias) and Bert, the BM person she regularly communicates with on sales issues. The official language in external communication is English and all participants speak fluent English. Informant: Maria

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(1)

From: Maria

Sent: Thursday, 20/1/2011 11:11

To: Niklas

Cc: Andrew; Koliias; Bert

Subject: ASTRA RECALL CANADA

Dear Niklas,

I was informed today by a prospect ASTRA customer about the recalls in Canada. I am sure she was informed about it by BM.

I would suggest in the future that you inform us about similar issues as it helps with customers and competition.

I goggled to find the link below.

[link]

Best regards

Maria

Signature

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(2)

From: Niklas

Sent: Thursday, 20/1/2011 12:48 PM

To: Maria

Cc: Andrew; Kolia; Bert

Subject: RE: ASTRA RECALL CANADA

Dear Maria,

Thanks for your message, I understand your concerns and agree that information like this comes as an unpleasant surprise. As Canada is not part of my area I am not automatically informed about regulatory issues in this geography, however will need to discuss if there is a possibility for better communication.

Best regards,

Signature

---

(3)

From: Maria

Sent: Thursday, 20/1/2011 15:26

To: Niklas

Cc: Andrew; Kolas; Bert

Subject: RE: ASTRA RECALL CANADA

Dear Niklas,

Thank you for your prompt reply. We do not really expect you to let us know within a few days after a problem reveals. I have noticed the recall is more than three months.

A similar issue received as IPCA-14399A letter last summer and may be arise from Canada installations.

In any case as we usually receive information on new products or even BM trouble from other sources we can also be informed about these serious issues which competitors can easily take advantage of resulting in loss of credibility to our customers.

Thank you for understanding

Regards

Maria

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(4)

From: Andrew

Sent: Thursday, 20/1/2011 16:00

To: Niklas

Subject: RE: ASTRA RECALL CANADA

Hi Niklas,

Wie geht es Deutschland wirklich? ich habe seit langem nichts von dir gehört. Wie es scheint, wie bekommen keine genügende Informationen, was die Widerrufung der Waren in Kanada betrifft. Bist du darüber informiert?

Machs gut!

Andrew

*Hi Niklas,*

*How're things in Germany? Haven't heard from you for a while. We seem to be having some problems with being properly informed about product recalls in Canada. Do you happen to know what's going on?*

*Take care!*

Andrew

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(5)

From: Niklas

Sent: Thursday, 20/1/2011 5:31 PM

To: Maria

Cc: Andrew; Koliias; Bert

Subject: RE: ASTRA RECALL CANADA

Dear Maria,

Following the comments from yourself as well as Andrew I did a bit of research in order to get further clarification. I found that a service memo went out on Aug 17th, to which your service organization has access. Stating the issue as well as describing the resolution. If this issue results in a recall (which is a bit of a misleading term as no instruments are being physically moved) for the EU

countries, I don't know. However, should this happen you always get the appropriate IPCA letter through our GC/QA department.

Best regards,

Signature

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(6)

From: Maria

Sent: Friday, 21/1/2011 10:09 AM

To: Niklas

Cc: Andrew; Kolia; Bert

Subject: RE: ASTRA RECALL CANADA

Dear Niklas,

Thank you for your answer but I am afraid we complain to BioMedical not because we have not received IPCA letters or have access to service memos. We are actually very pleased about these procedures and measures taken.

What we do not know and cannot evaluate is the impact of a problem in some countries which cause action such as IPCA letters. Canada is not a third world country and maybe has a very strict legislation therefore had ASTRA recalled.

What we imply is BioMedical policy to representatives. We would not like to endanger our sales because we are not informed on serious issues by BM and hear about these from competition. We can defend our sales better especially because we have procedures such as corrective actions.

I hope this clarify our views.

Have a nice weekend

Maria

Signature

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(7)

From: Maria

Sent: Saturday, 22/1/2011 09:10 AM

To: Andrew

Subject: RE: ASTRA RECALL CANADA

Το κλείσαμε. Ελπίζω δηλαδή. Για το καλό όλων μας.

Αν τα κατάλαβα όλα καλά τα Γερμανικά μου θέλουν λίγο ξεσκόνισμα. Είχατε στο παρελθόν επικοινωνία στα Γερμανικά?

*We settled it. That is I hope (we did). For all our sakes.*

*If I understood everything correctly my German is a little bit rusty. Did you communicate in German in the past?*

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The chain functions as a predominantly formal interaction between parties from two different companies as in emails 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 writers are representative of their respective companies and accountable to the internal senior managers who are copied in, and emails 4 and 7 are more personal and informal. Scholars have often associated email chains involving multiple participants with record keeping, accountability to superiors, company representativeness and accord the chain official formal status (Mills et al. 2000; Stanton 2004; Machili et al. 2019). Yet through the CCing facility, participants' status may change from "active decision makers" to mere "observers" and others may be added or excluded from particular emails of the chain, with the status of emails alternating from formal to informal and public to private accordingly, as the chain evolves (Machili et al. 2019).

The analysis shows that with the exception of the first email, virtually all references Maria makes to the complainant are with *we* (e.g. *we complain, we are actually very pleased* etc.) constructing herself as her company representative and adding a formal tone to the interaction. This representation is also evident in her coping in her senior managers in all steps of the complaint. Her consistent use of the more personalized *I* in place of *we* in the first email, therefore, stands out indexing a variation in the formality consistent with the rest of the chain. In this way, she projects her complaint as her own initiative in her role as a sales manager rather than in her capacity as a PharmaMed representative employee. As she explains,

*it looks more personalized a little less formal but it's my duty as a senior sales manager to know about these and cannot possibly find out about it out in the street so I took the risk [...] a calculated risk*

Maria launches a complaint toward a superior, risking being perceived inappropriately informal, yet acknowledging the norms of the particular interaction, she perceives it as a safe risk. The (small) breach of norms is instigated by her feeling of being mistreated and her strong sense of responsibility as a sales manager, and it is these perceptions that place her in a stronger position than her addressee, who is by default higher in the hierarchy.

A bit further down the chain, Maria stands out once again but with respect to a different linguistic feature. In her response to Niklas' denial of responsibility for the oversight (email 2), Maria varies her greeting from the rest of her public emails by consciously omitting her signature (email 3). In all the public exchanges, openings and closures are typically formal



(albeit not very formal) in the context of the two affiliate companies between two senior managers in different ranks who know each other; all emails start with *Dear* + first name and end with variants of *regards* (*best regards* is used 3 times, *regards* is used once) + first name +/-signature (signature is used 3 times). Asked about her omission, Maria comments:

*here (in PharmaMed) [...] we can decide whether to add it or not [...] I don't like projecting my credentials every single time you talk to someone [...] especially in our internal communication [...] I used it in the beginning (email 1) and yes I should have used it again but [...] I got upset [...] you tell them something and they don't understand senior officers and all [...] so I [...] bent the rules a little (laughs)*

As the quote reveals, Maria acknowledges the different practices between the two companies in the use of signature. The differences in communication practices between organizations, departments and work teams are ways for claiming membership and distinguishing one community from the other (Gimenez 2002; Angouri and Marra 2011; Incelli 2013).

Employees belong, or claim to belong, to more than one community in their workplace, and variation in style is part of negotiating professional roles and identities. Accordingly, although Maria recognizes the appropriacy of the presence of her signature in this external upward directed interaction, she takes advantage of the freedom afforded in her company to vary her use of signature and risk sounding inappropriate to take her complaint further/to be heard. By “bending the rules a little”, she constructs herself as a party who claims power by virtue of her rightfulness even in confrontation with a senior party. Sensitive issues such as complaints and grievances have been seen to cause a shift in formality (Gains 1999, Machili 2014b), but the appropriacy of the shift is subject to their organizational norms. A breach in those norms, therefore, tends to reflect an authoritarian move by either a party in a high

hierarchical position or a low post holder *doing* power in the course of the interaction. Although here Niklas is higher in seniority, Maria's omission of signature indexes an authoritative style which risks appearing insulting in her perception. However, as the interaction unfolds, the move does not seem to be perceived as inappropriate, illustrating the significance of the local context for understanding the style of writing. The breach in formality is then balanced by Maria's shift from the informal *I* to the more formal *we* and *our*, enabling herself to strategically pursue her claim further but this time, more as a complainant who has her company backing and support, than an isolated disgruntled employee. Clearly, illustrated here is the invocation of different even contrasting identities to *do* power at work to achieve both relational and transactional goals.

The following email (email 4) is restricted communication between two higher rank holders. By being written in German, the addressee's local language, it indexes intention to build rapport and solidarity among equals. Other studies have similarly shown the use of local language in multinational workplaces to build collegiality and group alliance (Erickson 1999; Holmes 2000; Machili 2014a). The building of solidarity is further supported by the informality adopted in the interaction. The email opens informally with *Hi Niklas* and closes with the friendly *take care* + the writer's first name and omission of signature. The addition of social talk *How're things in Germany? Haven't heard from you for a while* is also consistent with the informal personal style. The use of German signals exclusion of all other parties from the interaction even when the email is later added to the chain. With this intervention, Andrew takes control of the DM while excluding Maria, the immediately affected and officially accountable party for its resolution. Maria's role is downplayed and her boss appears as a stronger decision maker.

In view of Niklas' second denial of responsibility (email 5) despite her boss' intervention, Maria claims the floor back to close the issue with a formal exposition of her views carefully constructing herself as company representative (email 6). This can be seen in her consistent use of *we* and additional explicit clarifications on the company views. The formality is slightly toned down with the social *Have a nice weekend* and picks up again in the formal addition of her signature. The issue appears to be publicly settled with Maria holding her ground this time in her double capacity as Senior Sales Manager and company representative.

The chain closes with the second private exchange in Greek this time, the local language of the interactants, Maria and Andrew, similar to other studies on use of global and local languages in multinational organizations (Ailon-Souday and Kunda 2003). The informality is indexed in the lack of opening and closing salutations and the high degree of implicitness. The latter is evident in the repeated use of *it* as reference to the issue discussed, *all our* as reference to the company and *everything* implying the email written in German. *For all our sakes* builds solidarity within the team and the closure of the issue is projected as a collective move/achievement. Strategically, though, this is followed by a comment about the use of a language incomprehensible to the remaining participants and unofficially employed by the highest rank holder. The hint is Maria's acknowledgment of her temporary exclusion from the discussion and the inappropriacy of that move. Her resentment for being superseded in the decision-making process becomes clearer below

*I was set aside just like that [...] obviously I don't belong to the senior's world [...] but he should have known better [...] being dragged in like that (laughs) he probably meant to help but [...] German (?) [...] we've never used German before but then again he's been here much longer*

As the quote reveals, Maria feels excluded from what she perceived to be an issue falling within her own responsibility. She also feels justified, however, at her boss's failed attempt to keep this move private, and hits back by hinting that using German during the resolution of a problem that should take place in public is uncalled for and inappropriate. Filtering information to particular parties in email chains through the use of a local language is not a new practice and can be employed by higher and lower post holders alike who want to gain control of a collective resolution of an issue. By having the last word and taking control of the interaction again, Maria challenges Andrew's hierarchical authority but discretely minimizes the effect of her implications in *Did you communicate in German in the past?* acknowledging his seniority by virtue of his years of experience in the same company. Although the informality and implications raised against her superior could be considered insulting, in the context of this company, they appear to be afforded. The chain also reflects the complexities in collective decision making. Although email 6 appears to signal the finalization of the issue, *Maria's I hope we did* in the private follow up implies there may be more to it. The fluidity of collective decisions and the difficulties in agreeing on when a decision is reached are illustrated in this example and have been well discussed in the relevant literature (e.g. Huisman 2001; Angouri and Bargiela-Chiappini 2011).

DM is a process and although agreement at certain points, such as the chain we read here, constitute anchors for future actions, decisions feed into larger and more complex constellations of actions. This chain is also a succinct illustration of the use of multiple languages to in/exclude and manage social relationships. Professionals need to manage a sensitive equilibrium between their task-oriented activities and social relationships for which they deploy all the resources of meaning in their inventory.

To conclude, we see DM as an interactional and *ephemeral* process highly contingent on the identities the interactants project in situ, the way they linguistically formulate and reformulate these decisions, and the communicative norms of the organizations they part of. What counts as a decision in one organization may not count as one in another.

As emails have been found to be more efficient than other means in reaching people from different organizations, departments, hierarchical levels and in different geographical and time zones and areas of expertise quickly and at no cost, they provide an ideal space for solving problems and making and negotiating “decisions” rapidly. And although as one employee from the company noted “Whenever you have a problem, you can immediately reach a group of people who can help you”, emails also provide the space for the participants to forward their own agendas by negotiating their professional roles and relations. Talking or rather emailing work in this context *is* doing work.

### **Conclusion and directions for future research**

Workplace Sociolinguistics provides insights into the way employees employ linguistic resources strategically within and across workplace communities as they try to achieve relational and transactional goals. As the analysis of the data illustrates, formality and use of global and local languages are used as mechanisms for claiming and resisting group membership with the context of their group or organization. Far from blindly adopting the dominant organizational norms, employees negotiate and adapt them according to what is acceptable to their own groups and as they see fit to their own transactional and relational goals. Power at work is a dynamic concept dependent on employees *doing* control through

core business activities, such as, decision-making processes. From this angle, language is not a static fixed national variety, but a set of resources employed skillfully in different contexts and for different purposes/agendas. Generalizations about the linguistic practices of managers vs. post holders, old-timers vs newcomers, small vs large organizations etc. are seen as oversimplified and outdated and should be treated with caution.

To conclude, the modern world of work is changing. Employees change jobs, areas of expertise, geographical and time zones more than in the past. They work in teams which cross disciplines, languages, organizations and they need to be able to communicate their own work practices and to relate to those of others (Halvorsen 2013). Modern organizations have long become multinational and multilingual and the fast-developing technology accelerates the pace of their transformation. Employees from all types of workplaces immigrate, relocate or travel to other countries to do business. Accordingly, communication practices change to facilitate employees to work in teams across linguistic, departmental, organizational and national boundaries, time zones, and areas of expertise in their daily work schedule. This highly collaborative environment puts pressure on employees who must build rapport, learn from each other, solve problems and take decisions collectively. Emails have become the dominant means through which collective discussions and decisions on high stake company matters are held and recorded. Despite the suggested tendency of globalization to harmonize disparate professional cultures, the employees' daily work becomes highly variable, constantly demanding and highly competitive. As discrepancies between organizational policies and everyday practices have to be reconciled and global and local demands to be met, daily routine often involves the need to communicate in a range of languages (e.g. global and local), genres (e.g. email, meetings, face to face interaction), and styles (e.g. formal and informal) and employees often adjust to a "what works best" solution

rather than adhering to set official policies. Further, in the context of the continuous financial crises, high pressure on human and financial resources leads to the commodification of employee skills, which acquire value according to their importance for the company's economy (Gee et al. 2018). Future research needs to unpack those dynamics and feed into design of future work settings. In parallel, this work has immediate implications for those who offer/take language training for work purposes.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century work environment ultimately calls for a dynamic view of “workplace language” and of language needs for work purposes. Identifying and covering the language needs of people seeking work has been addressed by the language studies field for quite some time now, but it is still criticized for its prescriptive one-size-fits-all. Although some progress has been made, the gap still remains between what is actually taught and what actually happens at work. On the optimistic side, a lot has been and can be done to introduce students to the multivariate nature of workplace communication, such as, use of authentic materials and corpora. Cooperation between researchers, material developers and instructors across disciplines is equally promising. Generally providing opportunities for practice into transferring their communication skills (e.g. writing and speaking) to different contexts and “learning how to learn” are steps into the right direction.

In the multilingual, diverse and highly competitive modern world of business, where people are called to cross a multitude of geographical, professional and linguistic boundaries, the need to better understand how we interact at work becomes more pertinent than ever.

A first step to managing this complexity is to acknowledge that the old static norms of the past are long gone and that talking work in the world of today can be nothing else but doing work.

### **Further reading**

Angouri and Marra (2011) constitutes a dedicated piece of work on identity construction and negotiation in different professional settings. Through the discussion of a range of cases and contexts the reader gets an insight into professional practises as emerging in interaction.

Holmes and Stubbe (2003) is a seminal piece of work; it introduces the reader to core concepts and methodological approaches for unpacking workplace discourse. The volume constitutes one of the classics for novice and established researchers and is a good resource for designing projects in the field.

Sarangi and Roberts (1999) is a co-authored monograph, particularly useful for highlighting the complex relationship between power and workplace interaction. It provides the reader with a wealth of examples and detailed analysis.

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