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Business or Professional? A Context-Based Approach on Discourse and Communication

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***Abstract*:** This article explores the conceptual boundaries and intersections between professional discourse and business discourse, arguing that while business discourse is a subset of professional discourse, technological and social changes increasingly blur the distinction. Through an analysis of key theoretical frameworks and empirical studies, the discussion highlights how workplace communication is deeply context-dependent, shaped by evolving organisational practices and the digitisation of professional life. The article also differentiates between discourse and communication, stressing the role of context, intertextuality, and participant roles in constructing meaning. It concludes by advocating for a flexible, context-aware approach to analysing contemporary professional and business communication practices.

***Keywords*:** discourse, communication, business, professional, organisational, context

1. Introduction

In an increasingly complex and interconnected professional environment, the way communication unfolds within workplaces and businesses has attracted growing scholarly attention. At the heart of this discussion lies the distinction—and the overlapping—between professional discourse and business discourse. Although frequently used interchangeably, these concepts encapsulate nuanced differences that reflect broader shifts in organisational, technological, and societal contexts. By

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beginning with key definitions, this article explores the conceptual, terminological, and practical relationships between professional and business discourse. It further investigates how these forms of discourse evolve under the influence of social media, remote work, and organisational transformations. Through an interdisciplinary approach that draws on applied linguistics, organisational communication, and discourse analysis, we aim to clarify the boundaries and intersections among professional discourse, business communication, and workplace interaction, highlighting the importance of context as a central organizing principle.

2. Defining Business Discourse and Professional Discourse

"Professional Discourse refers to the linguistic interaction among the people employed in the same occupational field. In the business communication framework, these are typically individuals employed in the private sector organisations. They are expected to share a certain amount of professional knowledge of business activities and conventions, and can thus be described as belonging to the same Discourse Community"(Yli-Jokipii, 2008, 196) "Business discourse is all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organisations in order to get their work done" (Bargiela-Chiappini & al., 2013, 15)

We decided to start with the analysis of these two definitions in order to tap into the still controversial issue of the differences and similarities between professional discourse and business discourse. Is business discourse a subcategory of professional discourse? The label of "business" with reference to communication in professional contexts has been discussed and well-contested in time in various works regarding terminology alongside with other terms such as professional itself or workplace/institutional communication. Researchers such as Bargiela-Chappini and Nickerson (1998, 2007, 2013), Koester (2006) or Schnurr (2013, 2024) tend to refer to business discourse as one type of workplace communication, focussing exclusively on how people communicate in commercial organisations. In contrast, professional discourse would be characterized by the involvement of a "lay" person (Darics, 2015, 25) However, the distinction between organisational players and lay audience is less and less visible as the spread of social media has changed the way companies interact with their stakeholders. Lately, social media are transforming the practice of business communication and changing the nature of the relationships between companies and their stakeholders. Traditional business communication can be thought of as having a publishing mindset, in which a company produces messages and distributes them to an audience which has a few options of responding to the company. In contrast, the social media model uses social media tools to create an interactive and participatory environment in which all parties have a chance to join the conversation. Moreover, mobile technologies are also changing business communication offering a large range of fast and timely communication tools, but also creating lots of challenges and sometimes overwhelming the communication process.

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Under the circumstances, the separation between business discourse and professional discourse may not be as relevant from the point of view of terminology as it is from the point of view of the contextual framework. We are basically dealing with contexts and subcontexts: the larger context of professional life (the work environment, the workplace of any kind) and the particular context or subcontext (still debatable) of business life (corporate environment, organisational setting). The two are clearly overlapping and business discourse is clearly professional discourse within the context of business communication.

3. Professional Discourse and Professional Communication

Based on the conceptualisation of context, we are going to look into approaches regarding professional discourse within the area of professional communication or, as it appears in certain studies, as one and the same thing. We are living in a highly digitised and globalised world where effective professional communication has become even more critical for all the functions of the society.

In the majority of jobs, particularly white-collar jobs, work goals are accomplished through a variety of means such as online, offline and hybrid meetings, telephone calls, emails, presentations, memos, conversations, WhatsApp messages and the like. Nevertheless, even blue-collar jobs involve communication on a regular basis in different forms, not to mention other jobs where the basic daily activities involve a certain form of communication.

According to Schnurr (2024, 9): "Professional communication takes place in work contexts in a wider sense, where at least one of the participants is engaged in some kind of societally recognized work". Nowadays, a work context does not necessarily mean a physical location. According to statistics, in 2023, 12.7 % employees worldwide worked from home on permanent basis whereas 28.2% worked partly from home, partly in office. Therefore, a work context may be someone's home or a café, thus blurring the boundaries between professional and personal life. Professional communication may involve just professionals, professionals and the so-called "laymen" (clients, for example) or professionals and the wider public.

The conceptualization of the different contexts in which professional communication takes place could be established based on Goffman's theory of the so-called front and back regions. Ervin Goffman used the dramaturgical metaphors of frontstage and backstage in order to describe ways of studying social life. He identified "the place where the performance is given" (Goffman, 1969, 93) as "front regions" and as "back regions" those areas where "the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (Goffman, 1969, 97). It means that the frontstage performance would include an audience whereas the backstage activity may not be accessible to the audience and may even contradict the frontstage performance.

Starting from Goffman's approach, researchers have applied this notion to workplace contexts where the frontstage encounters refer to interactions between

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professionals and lay people (for example doctors and patients or lawyers and clients). On the other hand, backstage encounters refer to interactions between colleagues. Although we consider the application of Goffman's notions to workplace contexts a little overstretched, we cannot deny that as, Goffman himself, admitted, the distinction between frontstage and backstage is not always clear and so is the overlap between the activities associated with each. Professionals regularly move between interactions with lay people and interactions with colleagues and their communicative behaviours differ in each area. The specific context in which an interaction takes place has a considerable impact on the communicative practices participants use.

Boundaries between regions were particularly blurred during the Covid-19 pandemic when most people were forced to work from home and to deal with both professional tasks and personal matters such as children's home schooling. "As a consequence of this overlapping and merging of the previously largely separated professional and domestic domains, many people found themselves moving in and out of 'work mode', and in and out of communicating professionally."(Schnurr, 2024, 10)

Under these circumstances, other important features of professional communication emerge such as transactional and relational aspects (Schnurr, 2024). Transactional aspects refer to behaviours that aim mostly at work-related purposes (getting things done, achieving outcomes) whereas relational aspects refer to behaviours that focus on interpersonal relationships and workplace atmosphere. Although both aspects are clearly important, in many workplace interactions transactional goals seem to be participants' main concern (Koester, 2006, 26). However, relational aspects blend in all the time, as establishing and maintaining good relationships with colleagues is a crucial aspect of communication at work. You cannot act exclusively transactionally in a professional context as the nature of people's relationships may eventually have an impact doing business.

Holmes (2000) created a continuum of different types of talk occurring in professional contexts. This continuum starts with core business talk, then work-related talk, up to social talk and finally phatic communion. As we can see in this model, business talk becomes synonym with professional talk, as the author considers it "relevant, focussed, often context-bound, on-task talk, with a high information content" (Holmes, 2000:36). Phatic communion, on the other hand, would be not bound to a particular workplace context, but can occur in a range of contexts and it has very little referential content, being practically almost irrelevant for workplace business. Work-related talk and social talk, which are placed in-between core business talk and phatic communion, are supposed to contain elements of both.

The question raising from the analysis of this continuum is the same we have been asking in this article: is business discourse another name for professional discourse? According to the definition above, business talk would be the type of talk which is exclusively focussing on professional content and particularly context bound whereas work-related talk may contain information which is irrelevant for professional issues.

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Schnurr (2024) considers that there are different labels for professional communication. Early research on the topic used the term “institutional talk”, which was described as “talk between an expert representing some authority and a layman” (Gunnarson et al. 1997, 7 quoted in Schnurr, 2024, 14) Drew and Heritage (1992:3) defined institutional talk as “the principal means through which lay persons pursue various practical goals and the central medium through which the daily working activities of many professionals and organisational representatives are conducted”. They identified three features of institutional talk:

- “orientation by at least one of the participants to the same core goals, tasks or identities conventionally associated with the institution in question;
- special and particular constraints on what one or both participants will treat as allowable contributions to the business at hand;
- inferential frameworks and procedures that are particular to specific institutional contexts” (Drew & Heritage, 1992, 22)

The same researchers believe that “the institutionality of an interaction is not determined by its setting. Rather, an interaction is institutional insofar as participants’ institutional or professional identities are somehow made relevant to the work activities in which they are engaged” (Drew & Heritage, 1992, 3-4). This opinion, although expressed in the 90’s is very relevant for the current context of professional communication as people work remotely and the classical job setting is no longer the office, but could be anywhere where the person has a laptop and internet connection.

Another label for professional communication in Schnurr’s opinion is professional discourse. The overlapping of terms is obvious and the basis is Gunnarsson’s definition of professional discourse as “cover text and talk – and the intertwinement of these modalities – in professional contexts and for professional purposes.” (Gunnarsson, 2009, 5 quoted in Schnurr, 2024, 16). Gunnarsson also presents an inventory of features out of which we would reinforce the idea of professional discourse being goal-oriented and situated, often conventionalised and a reflection of the activities and practices that characterize a workplace unit or a group. Moreover, it is relevant for the purpose of this article to emphasize the fact that, according to Gunnarsson, professional discourse depends on four frameworks: legal, political, technical, socio-cultural and the linguistic framework. These frameworks are related both to the professional context and to professional communication. However, we should state that the terms professional discourse and professional communication do not overlap entirely, as discourse is more text-based and communication is more context-based.

Other researchers such as Sarangi and Roberts (1999) examined the differences between institutional discourse and professional discourse by explaining that “what the professionals routinely do as a way of accomplishing their duties and responsibilities can be called professional discourse while institutional discourse would then comprise those features which are attributed to institutional practice, either manifestly or covertly, by professionals (and clients)” (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999, 15). However, these differences are not always clear and the terms

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"professional discourse" and "institutional discourse" are often used to refer to the same reality.

Another difference in terminology, which has been discussed by researchers, is between workplace discourse and business discourse. Koester, in her book *Workplace Discourse*, defines workplace discourse as "spoken and written interaction occurring in a workplace setting" (Koester, 2010, 7). The definition is very broad and includes a large range of occupational contexts, communication between professionals and lay people, communication between companies as well as internal communication in companies. In contrast, business discourse as defined by Bargiela-Chiappini has a stricter meaning being conceptualized as "social action in business contexts" (Bargiela-Chiapini et a., 2007:3). We will refer more to this area in the next section. However, the distinction between workplace discourse and business discourse is clearly context based as, in the first case, we refer to general workplace contexts (maybe a hospital, a non-profit organisation or a small shop) whereas in the second case we are strictly referring to interaction in business contexts.

4. Business Discourse versus Business Communication

According to Darics, 2015 "business communication takes place during formal or informal encounters when a message (or a succession of messages in an interaction) is communicated by or addressed to an organisational or individual entity engaged in work-related activity". This definition focusses quite little on the context and more on the general framework where only the term "organisational" directs us towards the field of business. The issue could be further analysed by focussing on the dichotomies discourse versus communication and business discourse versus business communication respectively. The areas in question would clearly involve aspects related to cross-disciplinarity, discourse analysis, organisational communication, applied linguistics and last, but not least, contextual variables.

The term "discourse" has a multidimensional nature and has been approached from various perspectives. We may refer to it as purely language in use or as a social practice. Moreover, the communication process as information sharing involves both the use of language and the interplay between language, society and thought. Communication in itself is context-dependent and hence from, the discourse associated with communication in a certain context would be more textual in its approach, however allowing to understand the relationship between people and the organisation they create.

Bhatia (2014) pointed out that the disciplinary areas drawing on communication theory (business communication) and language/discourse –centered approaches (organisational discourse studies) started to converge due to the linguistic turn. The linguistic turn represents the direction in social sciences which is based on the idea that "proper understanding of societies, social institutions, identities, and even cultures may be viewed as discursively constructed" (Alvesson& Karreman, 2000, 137). This turn led communication researchers among others to adopt a linguistic/discourse analytic point of view in their work, resulting into a convergence

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between discourse analysis and academic areas with social focus. According to Jian et al, "organisational actors operate in communication through discourse "and it is "through discourse that language and communication meet" (Jian et al. 2008, 314).

Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2013) look at business discourse as social action in business contexts, which has been related in time to several fields such as discourse analysis, organisational communication, applied linguistics, so it has a cross-disciplinary nature. On the other hand, they see the dichotomy (business) discourse versus (business) communication as depending on contextual variables. The discourse allows the researcher to understand the relation between humans and the organisation they create whereas business communication would be business discourse plus organisational discourse. As mentioned before, business discourse is more textual whereas business communication is more contextual. The same authors assert:
"Business discourse is less motivated by pedagogical concerns and more with a concern with understanding how people communicate strategically in an organisational context" (Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 2015, 16). This is based on their previous assumptions, expressed a few years earlier that "Business discourse as contextual and intertextual is founded on the twin notions of discourse as situated action and of language at work" (Bargiela & Nickerson, 2007, 277).

Consequently, we can see that there is no discussion about business discourse and business communication without a discussion about context. Business discourse and business communication are shaped by organisations and they shape the organisation, becoming a space for dialogue. This is where we can detect the connection with organisational discourse, which is often seen either as business discourse or as part of business communication besides business discourse. This is why researchers such as R. Iedema and H. Scheeres (2013) refer to business organisational discourse, which is reflected in business organisational texts and is permanently influenced by organisational dynamics (tensions, changes etc.).

5. Context, discourse and communication

According to Janet Holmes, "the term 'context' applies at a number of different levels of analysis. The most local context of any utterance is the immediate discourse context. […] A second level of contextual analysis requires attention to the relationships between those contributing to the interaction: what are their relative roles, where do they fit in the organisational hierarchy, how long have they worked together, and so on." (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015, 37) It means that, through interaction, participants construct their social role and consequently in different social contexts they will tend to emphasise different aspects of their social identity and adapt/update their discourse.

When we refer to context, we should also consider the physical setting and the background knowledge of the participants as meaning is embedded in context and the shared background knowledge is essential for understanding what is happening. Thus, as Holmes asserts, "an understanding of the wider context is crucial both for

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interpreting discourse at a local level and for defining social identity" (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015, 38)

In the particular case of workplace interaction, we can clearly see its intertextual nature as it is deeply integrated into the business and social context of a particular group, as well as into a wider social or institutional order. By extension, the organisational context is the framework for all discourse instances, not just mere talk, because people working together share common assumptions, they may use the same jargon, they may share the same knowledge, experiences and reference systems. All in all, members of the same organisation have similar values and attitudes and they create the organisational culture. The organisational culture is context based, discourse-based and communication-based.

The basis for the research about the communication context is the model of organisational communication created by Pamela Shockley-Zalabak in 2002, which preserves the basic elements of communication (sender, receiver, message, channel, noise), its processes (coding, decoding, feedback) and adds interaction of the experience fields which are specific to the sender and the receiver, the organisational context of communication and the communication competencies. She considers four such competencies: the knowledge competency (the ability to understand the organizational communicational environment), the sensitivity competency (the ability to sense correctly the meanings and the feelings of the other members of the organization), the skills competency (the ability to analyse organisational situations correctly and to initiate the organizational messages correctly), the values competency (the ability to take responsibility for effective communication).

Knowledge competency represents the ability to understand the organisational communication environment and it develops through the exploration of the interactive process nature of human communication. Sensitivity competency is the ability to sense organisational meanings and feelings accurately and it is related to our ability and willingness to understand what others feel and do. Skills competency is the ability to analyse organizational situations accurately and to initiate and consume organizational messages effectively and it develops through analysis and practice opportunities. Values competency represents the importance of taking responsibility for effective communication, thereby contributing to organisational excellence.

In addition to the communication competency, Pamela Shockley-Zalabak's model of organisational communication includes more elements besides the traditional ones (sender, receiver, message, channel, code, noise): field of experience and context. The field of experience is "a set of specific experiences or background that all parties in communication bring to bear on the interaction. Generally, it is believed that the more common the field of experience among those communicating, the easier it is to share similar meanings or to construct shared realities" (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, 13).

What we do and what we say in a particular situation depends a lot on how much we know about it from our experience. When we are exposed to new things, we may react very differently compared to situations which we encountered in the past.

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Communication context is the environment for the communication interaction. Context includes not only the specific time and place of the interaction but also the roles, relationships and status of communication participants. As such, prior interactions between participants contribute to the construction of the current communication context. We can therefore say that context is both culturally and physically influenced and, as with other elements in the communication process, perception of context can differ from one communication participant to another.

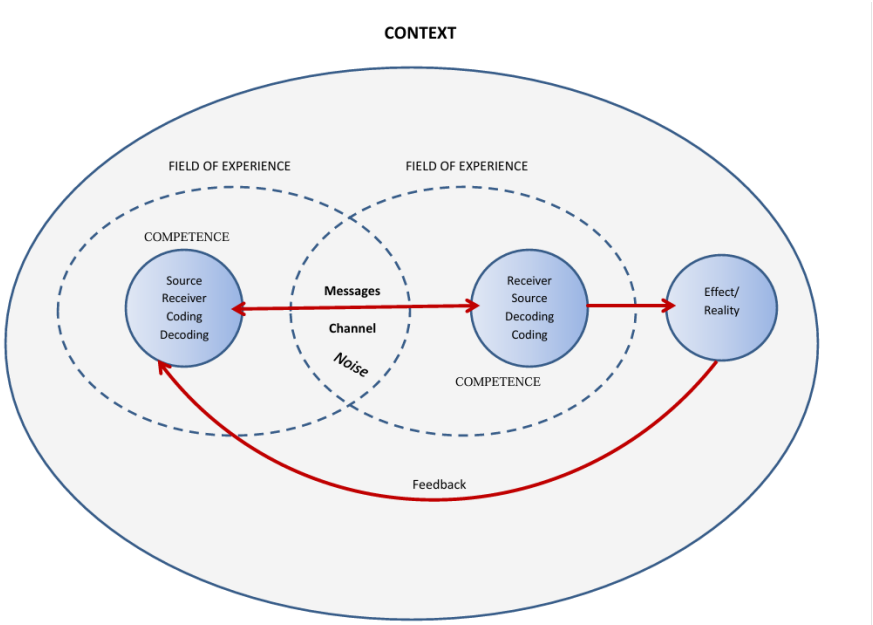


Figure 1: Pamela Shockley-Zalabak's model of organisational communication (2002)

4. Conclusion

The investigation of professional and business discourse reveals a rich, dynamic interplay between language, context, and organizational practices. While initially distinct, the boundaries between professional discourse and business discourse have become increasingly fluid, particularly under the influence of digital communication technologies and changing work environments. Business discourse can be seen as a specialized form of professional discourse, situated within corporate and commercial contexts, yet both share common features such as goal orientation, situational specificity, and the intertwining of transactional and relational functions. Moreover, the convergence of discourse and communication studies, driven by the "linguistic turn," underscores the necessity of considering both textual and contextual dimensions. Ultimately, understanding business and professional discourse requires a nuanced appreciation of the communicative competencies, contextual variables, and organizational cultures that shape interaction. This complexity not only challenges

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rigid terminological distinctions but also enriches our comprehension of how communication constructs, maintains, and transforms the professional world.

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