Introduction
Trading between reflexivity and relevance: new challenges for applied linguistics

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PREAMBLE

The basis for this special issue was a colloquium on professional discourse held within a conference at the University of Gent in August 2000 on the theme of Text and Talk in the Workplace. The colloquium itself was a truly interdisciplinary event, not just marked by the dialogic structure of the contributions by authors and commentators, but also by the fact that the commentator team included professional practitioners with their own particular perspectives. In this special issue we have retained the deliberations from these main papers and commentaries, but these have been supplemented with additional material. It is not the purpose of this editorial to replicate what the invited papers and the associated commentaries already attempt: they provide descriptions and analyses of three workplace-based projects. Other readers from their own distinct perspectives will engage with the issues presented here differently. We view our editorial task as chiefly to consolidate the common issues shared, but not necessarily resolved, by the papers and the commentaries.

The welcome opportunity afforded by *Applied Linguistics* to provide a platform to report on these workplace-based studies, mainly in the context of medicine and healthcare, allows us to achieve a number of aims. One is to foreground a relatively under-addressed field of research interest in applied linguistics in relation to its mainstream concerns such as those of language education, language acquisition, and literacy. Another aim, consequent on the methodological and analytic focus of this special issue, is to establish some resonance with field research more generally in applied linguistics. Thus, our position in selecting the papers in their current form, and encouraging commentary on them, has been guided not just in terms of defining the range of different roles applied linguists can take on in their professional lives, but also how they live through such shifting roles in context-sensitive ways. In this sense, we are using the notion of ‘reflexivity’ as a means by which a given professional group contextualizes its intellectual practices (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As Cant and Sharma (1998: 256) point out: ‘In contemporary society, ‘professionalism’ means to cultivate a division of the self by means of a particular kind of public–private, back stage–front stage boundary’.
This is reinforced in Goodwin’s (1994) candid account of how ‘professional vision’ manifests itself discoursally through context-specific and contested practices of coding, highlighting, and material representations.

TYPES AND TYPOLOGIES OF RESEARCH

The three core papers in this special issue represent different types of research ethos, so it is useful to consider various possible paradigms. We might usefully begin by re-asserting that the prefix ‘applied’ is not the sole property of research within the broad field of linguistics; it is common to other disciplines—ranging from the bio-sciences and physical sciences to arts, anthropology, and psychology. In 1929, Radcliffe-Brown in his address to the fourth PanPacific Science Congress in Java, argued that:

Anthropology is gradually establishing its claim to be regarded as a study which has an immediate practical value in connection with the administration and education of backward peoples [sic] [. . .] the provision of training in anthropology for officers entering the colonial services in Africa [. . .] This development has raised the question ‘what sort of anthropological investigations are of practical value in connection with such problems of administration?’ (1958: 39).

It is this practical, disciplinary motivation that led Radcliffe-Brown to draw a distinction between historical and functional methods of interpretation, and to privilege the latter method because the former is devoid of any ‘practical value’:

If, therefore, anthropological science is to give any important help in relation to practical problems of government and education it must abandon speculative attempts to conjecture the unknown past and must devote itself to the functional study of culture (1958: 41).

By extension, the term ‘applied’ in applied linguistics would need to be contrasted with other available interpretive paradigms: those focused on pure/basic research, those more engaged with consultancy, those emphasizing collaborative investigations with other disciplines, and with those engaged in professional practice in different sites. Although ‘applied’ and ‘practical’ should not be conflated (Roberts and Sarangi 1999, 2003: 338–59), practical relevance can be taken as a defining feature of all ‘applied’ research.

The distinction drawn above between basic and applied research is by no means clear-cut, when taken in context. As Brooks (1967) observes, the same research can be characterized as either basic or applied depending on the site of study, and in light of the potential users of the research in question. We might argue that any research carried out in a university environment is likely to remain ‘basic’ or ‘pure’ unless an effort is made to apply such research to real life issues. According to Brooks (1967: 24):

The essential point is that the categorization of research depends on the existing situation in technology and also on the environment in which it is conducted. As definite categories, basic and applied tend to be
meaningless, but as positions on a scale within a given environment they probably do have some significance.

Roberts (2003) captures this sentiment very aptly when she warns us about applied linguistic research increasingly becoming distanced from both self-reflexivity and practical values more generally—her call for an ‘applied linguistics applied’ echoes Bourdieu’s statement about the possibility of a ‘sociology of sociology’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

As a means of establishing an editorial perspective on the papers in this special issue, it is useful to explore the theme of typology in applied linguistic research from a number of perspectives: that of knowledge in relation to practice, that relating to temporality and functionality in the interpretation, and explanaoin of research data, that of disseminating research findings with practical relevance in mind, and, primarily here, that of the relationships to be explored and problematized among researchers in applied linguistics, and between those researchers and those outside applied linguistics with whom they work.

THE KNOWLEDGE/PRACTICE DIMENSION

Radcliffe-Brown’s position above attests how disciplines such as anthropology need to take on a functional stance in order to remain applied/practical. This has resonance with the Hallidayan functional view of language and interaction more generally. What is of equal importance, however, is the identity of an applied scientist, i.e. what constitutes professional knowledge and practice, and how pure and applied researchers negotiate their territorial spaces.

In 1967, the National Academy of Sciences in the USA made the following observation:

A good applied scientist should first of all be a good scientist by standards similar to those applied to basic scientists. However, a primary difference between basic and applied scientists lies in their respective attitudes toward disciplinary specialisation and personal recognition by professional peers. Good applied science usually, though not always, requires greater breadth and a more eclectic attitude toward knowledge . . . The applied scientist must often be satisfied with just enough understanding for his immediate purposes and cannot pursue every interesting lead to its logical conclusion. He must be interested in more than strictly intellectual solutions (Brooks 1967: 7).

Such a statement of professional identity and practice is not, of course, restricted to the disciplines of natural science. Much can be generalized across disciplines and professions. In the medical context, for example, it is widely accepted that clinical knowledge is distinct from scientific knowledge as such, as clinicians are interested in practical as opposed to intellectual solutions
(Freidson 1970). A similar position could be articulated for law as an academic discipline in relation to the professional demands of legal practice. These references to medicine and law suggest that a further difference between basic and applied research is the interest of the former in the general rather than the specific: for practitioners it is most likely that in dealing with individual clients the specific will be prioritized over the general. By extension, a case study approach, as illustrated by Engeström et al. (2003: 286), can be seen as a project in applied research, which not only looks at the particular, but does so in a framework of collaborative action involving practitioners. Roberts and Sarangi’s account (2003: 338–59) follows a similar route as far as dissemination of findings is concerned.

This is not to say, of course, that the specific will not continually impinge upon the general, or vice versa. Nor that the specific will be patent simply by a process of observation and experience. For applied linguists, however, especially those who locate their work in the professional and workplace context, these relationships are challenging, and often confounded by their very outsider status in relation to the communities and in the sites with whom and in which they seek to work.

THE ANALYST’S INTERPRETIVE BURDEN

A precise example of such challenges facing applied researchers positioned as outsiders to the professional practice and knowledge under study is the need to remain au courant with the discoursal shifts within a given workplace context—a point well illustrated in the paper by Iedema and Scheeres (2003: 316–37). However, recognizing and describing such shifts in discourse is not just a matter of making a link to shifting workplace practices, but, more fundamentally and problematically, that of the non-transparency of the significance of these shifts to the outside researcher to whom such professional practices based on tacit knowledge will always remain inaccessible unless collaborative interpretation is taken seriously, as S. Candlin observes (2003: 386–94). This is what Sarangi (2002) refers to as ‘the analysts’ paradox’, where analysts need access to participants’ insights in order to be able to understand the participants’ practices and tacit knowledge structures but at the same time they have to report on them explicitly in the language of research (see Becker 1993 and Stoddart 1974 for illustrative confessional accounts). Most basic to collaborative interpretation is the alignment of the participants’ and analysts’ stances, i.e. the fusion of emic and etic perspectives (Sarangi and Candlin 2001).

Moerman—one of the few scholars who have crossed the disciplinary boundaries between ethnography and conversation analysis—makes the point in a telling example:

All natives take their native knowledge for granted, take it to be nothing other than the nature of the world (Geertz 1975). But how could the conversation analyst recognize an utterance as a pre-
invitation, for example, without trading on covert native knowledge of dating practices and the special significance for them of Saturday night? (1988: 4)

To illustrate this further, consider Jones et al. (2000) study of culturally relative factors conditioning responses to quality of life (QoL) issues among people living with HIV/AIDS [PWA’s] in Hong Kong. Previous research on QoL had very largely taken a psychometric approach to data collection and analysis, in the tradition of biomedical research, and arguably, had produced results which, although often rich from a positivistic standpoint, worked against mutuality in the sense of the interpretability of such results to those most directly affected, the HIV positive participants, and their professional and non-professional carers. The challenge was to import a more qualitative dimension to such research, but going beyond mere researcher discussion of recorded data obtained from questionnaires, or brief transcriptions of focus group discussions in the absence of, and apart from the sources of the data, and engaging the participants themselves. The study explains in detail how participative and collaborative research involving focus group discussions with caregivers, both professional (doctors, nurses, social workers) and non-professional (friends, spouses, family members, volunteers), and PWAs could be combined to generate a body of data which could then be exhaustively coded as part of qualitative analysis.

An additional issue here is the power of our claims to make practices that need to have the necessary credibility for uptake—a point that Roberts and Sarangi emphasize in their work. With regard to the Jones et al. (2000) study, the issue of credibility concerned the continuing reflexive referral of the ongoing analysis to the research partners listed above, and, most significantly, the display of the research results for participant scrutiny in the form of workshops focusing on the central issue of HIV and QoL. This provided the opportunity for achieving mutuality in terms of ‘believed’ accounts of the themes under study. Most satisfyingly, and in keeping with the original project brief, the results provided the basis for on the one hand a significant adjustment to the orientation of the domains and facets in the World Health Organization’s draft HIV/AIDS module, and on the other as far as applied linguistic ‘knowledge’ is concerned, offered an alternative to a simple ethnolinguistic definition of ‘culture’.

Cicourel and Clarke, in their commentaries (2003: 360–73, 374–85), draw attention to several issues that are of significance. The notion of ‘ecological validity’ (Cicourel 1992) is extendable to include greater sensitivity to the research site: as Clarke points out, if researchers did not take on board the audit-management ethos of professional lives, their practices/actions might be misinterpreted. Such misinterpretations can also spill into the content area—the what and how of professional knowledge which is not the expertise of the researcher (see Ryle’s (1949) distinction between know that and know how).
REFLECTION IN AND ON ACTION

One useful example for the theme of this special issue, and in relation to the issue of the tension between reflexivity and relevance highlighted in this Introduction, is provided by Schön’s (1983, 1987) work on reflective practice. In arguing that practitioners in all professions have a reflective/reflexive attitude to what they routinely do, Schön (1987) outlines in his theory of reflective practice how the straight-jacketed training of professionals does not accord with what he terms the ‘messy, indeterminate’ problems of practice—whether in medicine, education, law, or in any other professional context.

Professional practitioners, he argues, develop their own ‘zones of mastery’ not only to cope with indeterminate situations, but also so that those indeterminate situations may become the resource for their accumulating professional competencies. Thus practice informs knowledge. Further, Schön (1987) suggests a useful distinction between ‘reflection in action’ that occurs immediately as a practitioner reasons out ‘what is going on here and now’ and ‘reflection on action’ which occurs only later, as a way of thinking back on what happened, but also with an eye to what can be learnt from such a reflection.

These observations have considerable relevance for the contribution that can be made by researchers in applied linguistics. Their orientation towards discourse evidence embedded in professional action offers considerable potential for resourcing this ‘reflection in action’ by drawing attention to such evidence. Understanding its significance, however, necessarily requires the alignment of participant and analyst perspectives. As one example, an analysis from a more conversational analytic perspective would seek to bring out how doctors and patients, in a consultation, jointly reflect or fail to reflect on the objectives and processes of the consultation. Through more categorization work (see Sarangi et al. 2003) discourse analysts can offer findings for reflection on professional activities, or simply display how the variable value of key constructs in the consultation are jointly negotiated and constructed (see the meanings of the term ‘viral load’ in doctor–patient interactions in the context of HIV/AIDS in Moore et al. 2001).

These examples resonate with the paper by Roberts and Sarangi (2003: 338–59), which indicates how discourse analytic work can even trigger unintended consequences, including the defining of best practices. For example, the idea of jointly viewing video-tapes of consultations rather than accounting for such consultations post hoc, is not good or bad in itself, but it does raise issues about reciprocity of perspectives—in this case what the Royal College Membership examination is assessing and what the data for such an assessment should be. This line of argument also applies to applied linguistic researchers doing reflection in and reflection on their work. In the context of genetic counselling discourse, Sarangi et al. (2003) draw our attention to how categorization of professional practice is necessarily an ad hoc interpretive process that requires mutual negotiation of terminology and their
meaning potential. Pre-existing analytic labels such as ‘therapeutic talk’ and ‘normalization’ can be seen as too loaded with values and ideologies, and may not be so helpful to advance collaborative interpretive practices.

DISSEMINATION ‘HERE AND NOW’: THE TEMPORAL DIMENSION

In his call for the study of social interaction in its own right, Goffman underlined the analyst’s motivation in a simple question form: ‘what is going on here?’. If we were to extend this to our subjects of research, it is reasonable to expect a parallel question from the latter, upholding their right to know what researchers find in a study motivated by a ‘here and now’ question. The temporal context in which research findings and their actual uptake/application are negotiated thus assumes significance. Practitioners who are subjects of discourse analytic study may ask for ‘hot’ feedback, so that they do not wait for too long to know what relevant findings can be put into practice. This suggests a genuine interest on the part of practitioners. Clarke’s response paper offers a useful distinction between bus-stop research and research in a clinical site, stressing that hot feedback can have implications for clinical practice, whereas in bus-stop studies or, for that matter, science labs, sociological/discourse analytic findings will have very little impact on scientific practice (see the critique of a sociology of knowledge of which only little becomes a self-reflexive project). This suggests that research on professional practice of the kind reported in this special issue requires a different take—in terms of matters such as knowledge, role-relations, and dissemination.

A recent experience of one of us (Srikant Sarangi) will illuminate the point. Srikant Sarangi was invited to act as a validator of the communication component of a Diploma in Palliative Medicine. This meant a day’s fieldwork on the examination day, shadowing some of the interactions that formed the basis of overall assessment. A purposive sample of interactions was recorded for transcription so that discriminatory interactional evidence could be found that would justify the award of good and poor grades. In a dramatic turn of events, however, the convenor of the examiners’ panel approached Srikant Sarangi to ask if he would offer any instant feedback to the examiners’ board, based on the day’s observational experience. This is a natural course of action in the medical circle (as Clarke points out), but not so in the applied linguistics scene (although Roberts and Sarangi (1999) had found themselves in similar situations while carrying out the RCGP study, when individual examiners would routinely turn round to ask for an appraisal of their ongoing performance).
THE RELATIONAL DIMENSION

Central to the discussion so far has been that of the participant roles in such applied research. It is a commonplace that the positioning of the researcher in any workplace setting is fraught with tensions. In ethnography, Agar (1980: 55) writes: ‘Explaining who you are is more than a local methodological problem. It is an act for which you are held accountable by your profession and your funding source’. Such a dilemma also extends to the ethnographer’s attempt as a complete stranger in requesting the status of an insider: ‘[Group members] will listen to you and watch your behaviour, and they will draw on their own repertoire of social categories to find one that fits you’ (Agar 1980: 54). The difficulty lies in the lack of opportunity and space in most studies for the researcher to define and negotiate his/her position with all members of a group (see also Whyte 1955), even if s/he is at the same time a member of the community in question. This problematic of role relationships in the ethnographic tradition is not unique: it can readily be extended to applied linguistic work involving a discourse-analytical mode of inquiry in professional settings. Indeed such work regularly permits the researcher to combine an ethnographer persona and a discourse analyst persona. What is the nature of these personae, and what relationships do they enter into?

As a means of exploring this theme we draw on an unpublished paper (Sarangi and Hall 1997) which addresses the issue of researcher role in applied/consultative research. They offer a list of possible role categories available to discourse analysts which we reproduce here.

Researcher as outsider/insider

In the ethnographic tradition, the role for the researcher is either to blend in or to keep a distance, with the aim in either case to least influence the activity under observation. Spradley’s (1980) distinction between passive versus moderate participation points towards a balancing of the researcher between outsider and insider status. The notion of trust seems central to this collaborative enterprise at all levels: data collection, sphere of participation, categorization, dissemination, etc. Inevitably, however, once obtained, the data cannot remain as some neutral and etic record. Interpretation of the data at once highlights the dichotomy between the etic record and the emic account (for the distinction between etic and emic). Indeed, one can argue that the very act of description is itself an activity which draws on a motivated emic perspective. No record is ever neutral.

This dichotomy, and the inevitability of taking an emic perspective, at once throws into relief the issue of researcher knowledge. As an insider, the researcher can add extra dimensions to the traditional roles of the ‘professional stranger’ (Agar 1980). In studies of professions, in particular, there are new opportunities to work in collaboration with professional workers. For example, in the case of the HIV/AIDS study (Jones et al. 2000)
discussed earlier, two of the research team were closely connected with some sections of the participant community. Indeed without the community membership of one of them (Yu), access to the Cantonese speaking informants would have been impossible. Without such a membership, finding a basis for mutuality with the participants in the research would have been similarly frustrated.

Many professions are interested and qualified in research methods, and their folk knowledge can become an important feature of analysis. Hall et al. (1997) have found in their collaboration that insider knowledge can provide insights otherwise unavailable to the external researcher. In their study of a case of ‘failure to thrive’ in the context of social work, features of institutional context and professional convention were highlighted, which enabled links to be made in the discourse analysis of focus and ground inter-relationships.

**Researcher as resource**

Resource can be interpreted in terms of researcher contribution to professional practices at the research site. In the context of an ethnographically informed project in multicultural classrooms (Roberts et al. 1992), the researcher was requested to provide help with assignments and learning tasks, and from time to time was approached in the coffee bar and asked clarification questions relating to the day’s lessons. Cant and Sharma (1998: 248), in their study of complementary medicine, recount how they were approached by their research subjects for help with research methodology, funding, and course validation: ‘If our informants provided us with “expert knowledge” about their own therapies and the ways in which their therapies had developed, then we could also be seen by them as a source of knowledge about universities, and the academic world of degrees and research’.

**Researcher as befriender**

The convention of research interviewing encourages the development of ‘rapport’ with the respondent. For example, Fielding (1993: 139) suggests that ‘a relaxed and unselfconscious interviewer puts respondents at ease’. However, such supportive encounters can also be seen to encourage respondents to develop their ideas in their formulations in ways which they have not previously established. The interview can become an occasion for inventing and concretizing opinions, not merely presenting already fully formulated ones. Hall found social workers happy to talk about their cases, partly because in the hurly burly of the social work office, they had very little opportunity to sit and talk reflectively about their work. The interview became an occasion for developing their version of the case in stronger terms. One social worker said after an interview: ‘That was very interesting. Now I can go and make my case to the Team leader for my plan’. The interview had given her a chance to rehearse and ‘firm up’ her presentation to the boss.
Researcher as target audience and assessor of performance

This raises the fundamental issue about pure observation. An illustrative case of this can be found in the classroom project mentioned earlier, where a teacher-participant wanted to negotiate the content and delivery of lessons with the researcher. This tendency on the part of the informants to put on a justifying performance needs to be seen in terms of the wider view of ‘accountability’. In the contemporary workplace setting, concerns about quality assurance and good practice tend to be conflated with the commissioning of research programmes. This ultimately leads to the researcher assuming an evaluative role. On a contingent basis, the researcher (as participant observer) is asked to provide feedback on current practice. Alternatively, the researcher is perceived as the visible hand of the establishment, with a brief to conduct systemic surveillance.

Researcher as expert/consultant and agent of change

The actor–audience roles are reversed in a consultative model of workplace research. Once the outsider researcher is presented as an expert, the onus is on the researcher to perform as one. Hall found that in observational meetings of senior social work managers, he was being asked to provide comments on what he was observing (if not answers)—this is very similar to asking for ‘hot’ feedback discussed earlier. The senior managers were very sensitive to research—given the growing prestige of research in social work—and reacted to the research event as an inspection. They were eager to defend their position and display their good practice. At one point in the meeting, Hall was told by a senior manager ‘it is nice to have researchers around—they keep you on your toes by asking really incisive questions’. Hall commented that it was terrifying to think of an ‘incisive question’ to ask, and felt more on trial than those he was observing: if he didn’t ask a clever question quickly, he would lose credibility. The issue is further complicated when the researcher is also expected to be an expert on the topic. How can the researcher both incorporate the working knowledge of his/her informants and produce an expert critique?

Sarangi and Hall (1997) conclude:

In summary, we have suggested a number of constraints on the traditional role of the researcher in workplace studies. We offer it as a tentative and incomplete list. It is based on our modest fieldwork experience and others will no doubt have other stories to tell. It is, however, the case that new roles of the researcher are inevitable as we are expected to act as consultant/assessor/evaluator, which present different challenges to the role of the neutral and distant researcher. We are suggesting that this need not necessarily be seen as only a problem but might offer opportunities for more fruitful data collection and analysis.
Cicourel, among others, alerts us to the fact that these role-relations are not just fixed categories, but that researchers are required to move between them in context-sensitive ways. ‘Getting involved’ (which also requires the researcher to take on a learner role) is what is needed to have a closer alignment with the research subjects, but this is not without problems—including relational ones—nor without the risks of compromising analytic independence vis-à-vis collaborative interpretation.

It is also the case that some types of role might be more expected than others in a given situation. It seems the researcher has to be on his/her guard throughout the research process and beyond. Clarke perhaps overstates the parameters of self-presentation, which include aspects of physical appearance and behaviour—almost reminiscent of bedside manners in which doctors used to be trained. But although one can quibble about what is acceptable and what is not, the underlying assumption regarding the importance of respecting the reciprocity of expectations is a valid one: reducing the intrusiveness of observers can help to reduce damage to the research processes and outcomes. Although ethnographic observation can be a rich resource for validating discourse analytic claims, any rupture in the sphere of participation will jeopardise the authenticity of what one gets to observe and the impact such observation might have on what is being observed.

It is not just that researchers vary greatly in the ways in which they position themselves. It is also the case that the researched are not a homogenous group either. Consider once again the ethnographically informed classroom interaction project. The work involved collaborating closely with four teachers in four different sites. The idea was to get them involved in the project as much as possible in an action–research format, but the result was variable success. Interestingly, three out of the four teachers wanted to carry on their teaching activities as usual, subjecting themselves to observations (including video recordings) and follow-up interviews. But there were various levels of involvement and expectations. At one extreme, there was the teacher who wanted to play to the research (like playing to the camera) asking the researcher ahead of video recordings what we would like her to include in the lesson, etc. This is the observers’ paradox taken to its extreme. The other two teachers were very different in their teaching styles (reported in Roberts and Sarangi 1995, 2001), but they also turned out to have different views about the research process and their role within it, although they were both enthusiastic and supportive of the outsider presence. One of them thought of the research as an impetus to learn and reflect upon her professional practice. The other remained more institutionally grounded, going about displaying her competent professionalism through her daily routine. At the follow-up interviews, different types of responses were foregrounded: the former bringing together the interprofessional and interpersonal dimensions to capitalize on the affordances (also reflected in her views about teaching and learning), and the latter offering her views about teaching and learning in abstract, pedagogical terms. The research benefited from documenting these
two different styles, without necessarily privileging one over the other, but
did raise the issue of how the students might relate to these differences: for
instance, whether certain student types may tune in to one style more readily
than to another, with consequences in terms of learning outcomes.

What is relevant to our discussion here is the position taken by the fourth
teacher-researcher, who remained primarily distanced from the research
itself. She was reluctant to be interviewed, and had no enthusiasm for ‘hot’
feedback. Her line was as follows: the research is about learning and teaching
in the classroom, and she has agreed to be filmed in the classroom and that is
the end of the relationship. She had no extra time to spare in terms of
feedback or reflections. It transpired that she was going through a period of
stress related to her temporary job contract and had little motivation for
anything beyond the minimum required of her present job description. We
are not here even talking about what this meant in her personal and social
life. As Cicourel points out, the mundane realities not only affect the
researchers: they are also a part and parcel of the life of the researched. As
far as the researchers are concerned, in Cicourel’s words, ‘we invariably look
at trade-offs but the result is that we ‘‘let go’’ and attempt to meet our
practical task deadlines’. As far as the researched are concerned, they may
bring different motivational relevancies and irrelevancies to the research
project, which is often thrust upon them. Cicourel is right in suggesting that
there will be political and social divisions within the workplace, and that
investigators have to walk a delicate line between different factions—a point
which echoes Becker’s (1967) question about the researchers’ affiliations.
These life events rarely find their way into the process of interpretation or into
the pages of journals and books.

CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS OF APPLIED KNOWLEDGE

We raised at the start the relationship between basic and applied research.
Funtowicz and Ravetz (1992) conceptualize the relation between applied and
theoretical research more broadly, and pragmatically. They introduce two
crucial elements—decision stakes and systems uncertainty—which are bound
to mediate how expert findings will or will not be acted upon (see Figure 1).
In addition, expert findings are often uncertain and therefore cannot be
applied directly to practice. According to Funtowicz and Ravetz, the days of
‘applied science’ are over, where a group of researchers claimed expertise and
their knowledge base was undisputed and imported for application. As experts
experience more and more uncertainty, and as they are called upon to engage
in new territories where there are different stakeholders who have to weigh
up the costs and benefits of expert knowledge, we are entering the stage of
‘post-normal science’. This is the point where values surrounding decisions
are more complex than the scientific facts available to base such decisions on.

From our discussion it is apparent that discourse-oriented applied linguistic
research is a particularly difficult area. The practitioners who are the subjects
of research are more knowledgeable about their practices than the researchers themselves, which makes it necessary for discourse researchers to constantly seek the practitioners’ insights for everyday sense-making. Following this logic a bit further, we would suggest that workplace practitioners are discourse experts in their own rights, since their work practices are constituted in discourse (Sarangi 2002) and they can easily reflect upon their practices in a metalinguistic sense (as can be the case in interview-based studies of professional practice). The role of the applied discourse researcher then becomes one of finding patterns based on evidence, with the hope that such patterns will explain unambiguously the tacit levels of professional knowledge and action.

This invites us to revisit the role of discourse analysis as a methodological toolbox, and an extremely relevant one at that. As we cross different professional boundaries, and find that our findings align with professional practitioners’ tacit understandings, the methodological apparatus gains its share of approval. There are of course occasions where discourse analytic findings are viewed with suspicion, even when framed in terms of empowerment and social justice. Our concern here has been with the optimist practitioner, in line with the case study reported by Roberts and Sarangi (2003: 338–59). It is feasible for professional practitioners to become discourse analysts of their practices.

We would like to end by going back to the palliative care validation example discussed earlier. A year after the hot feedback was given, a medical colleague and Srikanth Sarangi were to work on the now transcribed data. In looking closely at the involvement styles of the doctors, the focus was to identify interactional patterns and to see if good and bad consulting styles could be explained in discourse analytic terms (e.g. topic development,
empathic alignment, recontextualization practices, etc.). It soon became clear that there were no generic good and bad consulting styles: a style which might be appropriate in palliative care or chronic pain management might be unacceptable in primary care or accident and emergency services. As one would expect, Srikanth Sarangi and his medical colleague approached the data differently: for the latter an existing set of stipulated guidelines for consulting became the basis for engaging with the data; for Srikanth Sarangi, it was the emergent nature of the interactional and thematic patterns.

Over a few discussion sessions the medical colleague tried out the discourse analytic method and was able to use it not only to map and evaluate the involvement styles of her medical students, but also to use the interactional patterns as a way of offering ‘hot’ feedback to the students in question. ‘Good’ versus ‘bad’ styles were resignified as ‘appropriate’ versus ‘inappropriate’ styles according to the context. For us, this exercise represents a fusion of reflexivity and relevance—where the practitioner was reflexive about her practice and applied a newfound methodology in a practically relevant way. The discourse analyst’s role had been a truly mediating one!

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