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Applying linguistics in making professional practice re-visible

Tom Bartlett
Cardiff University

Honglin Chen
University of Wollongong, honglin@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

Editorial: In their introduction to the first issue of the relaunched Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice (JALPP), Sarangi and Candlin (2010) give two readings to the conjunction of 'applied linguistics' and 'professional practice' in the title, signalling two complementary agendas in applied linguistics research. The first agenda is to extend the study of language and communication to a wider range of professional contexts, i.e. to respecify the field of applied linguistics; the second is to contribute to the transformation and recontextualization of the professional practices of applied linguists in advancing knowledge and providing professional judgement. Following this lead, this special issue presents six papers which draw inspiration from Hallidayan scholarship in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to analyse, interpret and make sense of professional practices across a range of sites and from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives, and in this introduction we set out and reflect on the appliability (Halliday 2007) of SFL as a mediational means in such research settings.

Editorial

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1 Introduction

In their introduction to the first issue of the relaunched *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice* (*JALPP*), Sarangi and Candlin (2010) give two readings to the conjunction of 'applied linguistics' and 'professional practice' in the title, signalling two complementary agendas in applied linguistics research. The first agenda is to extend the study of language and communication to a wider range of professional contexts, i.e. to respecify the field of applied linguistics; the second is to contribute to the transformation and recontextualization of the professional practices of applied linguists in advancing knowledge and providing professional judgement. Following this lead, this special issue presents six papers which draw inspiration from Hallidayan scholarship in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to analyse, interpret and make sense of professional practices across a range of sites and from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives, and in this introduction we set out and reflect on the *appliability* (Halliday 2007) of SFL as a mediational means in such research settings.

In approaching this task, our first consideration was to ask what, beyond their use of a common theoretical/descriptive framework, unites the papers in this special issue? And perhaps the best answer to that is that each of the

Contact authors

Tom Bartlett: Centre for Language and Communication Research, Cardiff University, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, UK
email: BartlettT@cardiff.ac.uk

Honglin Chen: Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia
email: honglin@uow.edu.au

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papers, in its own way, seeks to make visible key features and functions of professional practice that are, or have become, invisible to the practitioners themselves and so to those being apprenticed into their practices. This is a concept that not only invokes the long association of SFL with Bernstein's (1971) contrast between visible and invisible pedagogies, but also suggests methodological concerns that are of significance within applied linguistics in general. These themes will be discussed in the following sections and exemplified in our brief overview of the individual papers. Along the way we will also address issues that have been identified as central to the mission of this journal: our *motivational relevancies* (Sarangi and Candlin 2001; Candlin and Sarangi 2004) in asking the research questions we ask and in selecting the methods we employ to answer them; and, as a consequence of this, the need for *inter-relationality* amongst applied linguistics practices, between these and other disciplines (Candlin and Sarangi 2004; Sarangi and Candlin 2010) and, more pressingly, between academic researchers and professional practitioners.

2   Invisibilities in professional practice and in applied linguistics

Our theme of (in)visibility can be located, amongst other places, in Pierre Bourdieu's twin concepts of *practice* and *habitus*:

> The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu 1990: 53)

Bourdieu's focus was on the practices of everyday living, but the idea that proficient members are able to act appropriately yet without 'a conscious aiming' or an 'express mastering' can be extended to include their secondary socialization into professional practices. This fits well with Vygotsky's (1978: 27, 89–90, 126–128) idea that such practices become *internalized* and *appropriated* through repeated interactive experience with an expert other and, as such, are less open to reflection by the practitioners themselves. However, this internalization and loss of reflexivity, while fundamental to the performing of professional practice on a day-to-day basis, also leads to problems and issues that are addressed in the collected papers here. The first of these, apparent in the papers by Chen and Jones, Donohue and Coffin, Forey and Lam, and Gardner, concerns apprenticeship into a community of practice (Lave and Wenger

1991). More than simply the mastering of new information, apprenticeship, or learning how to act appropriately, comes about through being situated within a community of practice and actively participating in its routines (Lave and Wenger 1991). Following Vygotsky again, a crucial element in apprenticing is the provision of *scaffolding*, the controlled induction of apprentices into their *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky 1978: 84–91; 1986: 187–196). But, if their practices have become internalized, made invisible, to the practitioner-trainer, how is this scaffolding to be provided? There is clearly a pedagogic need for practice to be *de-internalized*, made visible and open to reflection before adequate scaffolding can be provided. This can be seen as a role for applied linguists who, in their analyses, make the workings of practice visible and accessible, perhaps even making the familiar strange once again as they introduce a new gaze. Here mere description of the workings of practice is not enough: rather, there is a requirement to make practice *significantly visible* (Candlin and Sarangi 2004: 4), impelling us to scrutinize the forms of analysis employed as mediational means in the act of 'visiblizing' – asking ourselves not only what is achieved through our analyses, but also what is neglected by the particular theoretical gaze adopted, questions that lie at the heart of the analyst's paradox (Sarangi 2007; Sarangi and Candlin 2010: 6). Along with this question of *how* the workings of practice are made visible, further questions arise as to *what* is made visible, *to whom*, *along with whom*, and *for what purpose*, including considerations of how the insights gained can be utilized to suit the purposes identified. There is also a danger that in focusing on the commonalities of performance amongst seasoned practitioners we provide a very partial picture of good practice, one that neglects its *creativity* (Sarangi and Candlin 2010: 3–4). We, therefore, have to consider the extent to which the provision of generic templates for written academic assignments (Gardner, this issue) allows for artistry in practice and the related question (touched upon in Donohue and Coffin's paper) of whether scaffolded apprenticeship into one culture's expectations of practice discriminates against apprentices already socialized into the alternative practices of their own cultures: a key issue in Academic Literacies (e.g. Chen 2001).

3   SFL: A powerful tool for making the invisible visible

Systemic Functional Linguistics has been developed explicitly to model and describe language understood as a 'social semiotic' (Halliday 1978) in which meaning-making is the acting out of different social contexts. Halliday develops the idea, derived from Vygotsky, that language is the mediational means through which, on the one hand, we make sense of the world around us as a system of interconnected concepts and, on the other, we come to internalize

and replicate the practices of those around us as they interact with the world as they understand it. Put differently, knowing and doing are both forms of meaning. Language description within the SFL tradition is therefore orientated towards the functionality of linguistic features at various levels, from their language-internal relations, through the meanings they construe to the contexts they act out, so that, as suggested by Halliday's formulation above, the study of language becomes not just an accompaniment to the study of situated action, but the study of such action itself.

A central tenet of SFL, particularly as opposed to formalist linguistic theories, is that language and social life have evolved in tandem and that language is as it is because of the social functions it serves (Halliday 1978, 1994). There are thus three broad areas of meaning in language, which correspond to the social basis of semiosis: the experiential, which construes our experience of the world as relationships between processes and participants; the interpersonal, which construes the relationship between interlocutors; and the textual, which relates to the uses to which language is being put and the cohesive relations between parts of the text and between the text and the setting in which it is produced. Identifying the grammatical features of texts as they relate to these three broad *metafunctions* is a key step in SFL analysis connecting texts to their contexts of use.

Central to this functional model of language is a sophisticated semiotic architecture organized into three interconnected strata, with features of the lexicogrammar combining to construe a higher order of meaning, that of semantics, which in turn construes a still higher order of abstraction, that of context (see Matthiessen 2013 for a concise account of the architecture of SFL as it can be applied to institutional settings). However, while the lexicogrammar and semantics are inherently linguistic, context is not a linguistic stratum but refers to those aspects of the non-linguistic world that are construed through the semantics as relevant to the ongoing social action. The connection between context and the linguistic strata of semantics and lexicogrammar is thus an object of linguistic enquiry, particular to the extent that context can be divided into experiential, interpersonal and textual features that correlate with the linguistic metafunctions identified above. In this way the interconnection between language and social activity – and in particular, how contextualized professional practices can be seen as construed through language – is made more explicit, more tangible, than in other theories.

The semiotic architecture of SFL presents language as a complex series of meaningful oppositions (systems) within the semantic and lexicogrammatical strata, with choices made simultaneously within the three metafunctional areas of the semantics being reconstrued in terms of the meaningful contrasts available in the lexicogrammar (Thompson 2013). The choices made when

language is used then recalibrate the context as a system of meanings 'at risk' and the cycle continues. The entire meaning potential of the language can therefore (in theory) be represented as a vast system network of meaningful oppositions with a text seen as one instance of this potential, where choices have been made within every system. In this way texts can be seen as meaningful arrangements of choices made and not made from the potential of the language. Between the system as a whole and the text as an instance there are areas of meaning potential which are recognized and favoured by specific text types, or *registers*, such as 'the language of political interviews' or 'the language of science journals' (Martin and Rose 2008). Recognising registers – recurrent configurations of linguistic choices across the three metafunctions – enables us to compare texts at a certain level of abstraction while also uncovering the differences between them in more specific (or *delicate*) terms. Following Martin (1992), *genre* is defined as an abstract level above register, the relationship between recurring social situations and the language which is involved in realizing these. Work in the Martinian tradition, particularly in Australia, has been particularly useful in academic and professional contexts, as it broaches the sociolinguistic issue of discrepancies between the way in which different social groups carry out the same activity and the tensions that are likely to arise when one generic convention carries prestige while others are stigmatized. SFL's extravagant architecture has been particularly useful here as it allows comparisons at various levels of abstraction and according to the different domains of meaning within the theory. In this way the theory can help both to identify the exact nature of the differences in the generic conventions of the groups involved and also to highlight the points of similarity. However, the explicit goal of apprenticing students from minority cultures into the standards of the dominant group as a means of empowerment, as espoused by those working within the Martinian tradition, remains an area of some debate (Luke 1996; Rose 1999; Bartlett 2012; Donohue and Coffin, this issue).

4   Overview of the special issue

In the opening paper of this special issue, Gardner combines the techniques of SFL genre analysis and corpus linguistics to explore the variety of expectations of Case Study assignments across different academic disciplines and the different demands each imposes on seemingly similar tasks. In studying successful papers in Business and Medicine from the BAWE (British Academic Written English) corpus her goal is to make visible exactly what tutors expect when they set particular types of assignment. What is left unexplained in assignment guidelines is a perennial cause of frustration to students and, in the terms of our theme in this introduction, can be related to tutors failing to make explicit,

or visible, practices that they have internalized and so take for granted. The purpose in Gardner's work is therefore to make these expectations visible once again. This includes both the structuring of the different genres through *stages*, and the way in which the different stages are *realized*, the mode of expression. A key finding in the paper is that what are superficially similar genres are perceived differently within specific disciplines, or *contexts*; a finding which raises a key methodological question for SFL-based genre studies, which assume a certain universality in what a named stage looks like linguistically and the functions it fulfils within the overall generic structure (Martin and Rose 2008). The differences revealed in Gardner's paper include how tutors expect generic stages such as *recommendations* to be worded to reflect the different *roles* into which the students are being apprenticed. Here Gardner's examination of the valued wordings goes beyond providing a template that can be mimicked to highlighting stylistic choices that force the students to take on the appropriate roles as they write; for example, through their choice of cognitive and affective mental processes. The guidelines she sets out therefore act as scaffolding into professional apprenticeship that extends beyond essay writing and remains at a sufficiently generalized level to allow for artistry in the realization of the various generic stages. A further key element in Gardner's paper is the continuum she identifies between academic and professional genres or, more pertinently, between stages within mixed genres, and the need for students to adapt to the *hybridity* of practice (Sarangi *et al.* 2007; Bartlett 2012) and the different roles that this entails. Gardner's theme of the mixing of practitioner and pupil roles is also a central point in the second paper.

Like Gardner, Donohue and Coffin apply an SFL-informed genre framework to examine the writing requirements in vocational university courses, and they too find tensions in the writings of students as they meet the challenge of combining the practical register of social care with the discursive register of academic essays. Informed by Hasan's (2009) notion of semantic orientation – different ways of meaning-making – Donohue and Coffin adapt their applied linguistic interest in genre analysis to focus on how students from culturally and educationally diverse backgrounds themselves explain the functions of key sentences from their own texts in terms of the requirements of the genre as they understand it. Rather than adopting a corpus linguistic approach, therefore, Donohue and Coffin *inter-relate* genre analysis in the SFL tradition with insights gained from participant interviews. The data from these discussions make visible strikingly different ways in which students orient to the task in hand, and in particular the extent to which they either rely on discussions of practice to implicitly address theoretical issues or make the connections between practice and theory explicit. Comparing the practices of students attaining good and poor marks, Donohue and Coffin demonstrate how successful students produce sentences at key points

that: (i) project the progression of generic stages expected within the academic discipline; (ii) realize the goals of the stage in question in ways that are visible to the marker; and (iii) demonstrate a progression from categorical to perspectival meanings. The interrelation between genre studies and on-task interviews which was developed to meet the requirements of the university while drawing on the expertise of the researchers shows how an alignment of distinct motivations can lead to original and constructive practices within applied linguistics. In this case the interviews made visible to the researchers how students oriented to the requirements of the paper in different and often implicit ways in a manner that text analysis alone could not have achieved. As a result, interventionist strategies that catered to both the requirements of the university and the diverse backgrounds of the students could be developed. However, while these strategies are aimed at apprenticing students into understanding generic expectations and responding to them according to the standard practice of the discipline within the UK, an alternative perspective is suggested by the authors when they state that 'recognizing semantic variation among the participants in this academic community of practice connects diversity directly with ways of making meaning.' Achieving this recognition and valuing such diversity, however, first entails making the logic of alternative practices visible to the tutors.

Moving away from the classroom, the third paper, by Forey and Lam, presents findings of long-term research carried out in collaboration with the call service industry in the Philippines into analysing what makes a 'quality' call. The paper demonstrates how a speech function analysis of communicative exchanges can help reveal linguistic choices that are characteristic of 'quality calls'. Central to their paper is the finding that call centres in general quantify success using a range of hard measures, such as call duration and 'correct' use of grammar, and that these measures showed little connection with the evaluation of individual calls by third-party assessors. However, the criteria for grading the calls by the outside assessors remain invisible and the purpose of the paper is to identify the characteristic linguistic features of highly evaluated calls. The findings suggest that the effective use of congruent and non-congruent discourse functions (direct or indirect speech acts) varies with the role demanded of the operators and the limiting of options made available to the client according to the goal of the call and different stages within it. Further significant factors identified through more delicate linguistic analysis are the use of personal or institutional voice in keeping the call on task and in securing the appropriate response from clients, while follow-up interviews with customer service representatives brought to light the cultural difficulties experienced by Filipino staff in hybridizing the dual roles of command and rapport that are effective in achieving this. These are variables that are beyond the scope of the training currently provided to the operators, which, as the

authors put it, 'is often implicit, and rarely based on evidence and research within the industry.' Existing training comes in both 'hard' form, through the provision of pre-prepared scripts and targets, and 'soft' form, with training based on 'experience and intuition'. While the former clearly fails to constitute adequate linguistic training, the latter falls prey, as we have argued above, to the dangers of expert practice having become routinized to the experts and invisible to both trainer and apprentice. The linguistic methods used by the authors help to make the practices behind the trainers' 'experience and intuition' visible again.

Returning to the academic context, but from a very different perspective from that of Donohue and Coffin and of Gardner, Chen and Jones' paper takes up the long-debated argument of the value of explicit grammar teaching in literacy classrooms, in the Australian context. Drawing on Vygotskian and Hallidayan traditions, their paper considers the important role of the expert's mediation through classroom interaction in making knowledge about language visible and accessible to all learners. They argue that the use of SFL-oriented metalanguage is an effective classroom tool in improving student performance (language as social practice) while also enabling teachers to develop their pedagogic expertise in teaching about grammar and providing students with the means to reflect on the linguistic choices they make (language as knowledge). Through a nuanced SFL analysis of the expert's (teacher's) metat-alk, interviews with students and their writing samples, the paper presents a systematic account of how students' metalinguistic understanding develops and what promotes this development. As such, it contributes to an inter-relational theorization of an underexplored area of study into novice students' conceptual development in metalinguistic understanding.

The fifth paper, by Lassen, is rather different in direction and methods from the first three papers, and focuses on how 'non-human actors' perturb the practices of hospital staff in a Danish hospital. The paper has two connected strands of analysis. The first of these considers the way in which hospital practices are represented in documents such as the Mission Statement and the Hospital Vision, which are increasingly visible components within the mechanisms of 'New Public Management'. In this strand Lassen combines the work of Latour (2005) on Actor Network Theory and Halliday's (1994) concept of grammatical metaphor to produce a three-point cline of 'non-human' representation, with congruent human actions at one end and Latour's non-human actants at the other, and with Halliday's agentless acts, represented as either nominalizations or event nouns, in the middle. In this way she shows how an idealized version of the hospital is produced, a vision that represents the 'doings and happenings' of the hospital routine (Halliday's material processes) as taking place without reference to human agency. In the second strand of her

paper Lassen supplements her analysis with interviews from the hospital staff to show how generic documents such as the Mission Statement and the Hospital Vision, along with other non-human actants such as time and rosters, act as constraints on the staff's performances and often run counter to their own human vision of their professional actions and responsibilities. The paper thus demonstrates, amongst other things, how the routinized writing of generic documents can render invisible not only the actions of professional practitioners but also the effects that these documents have on staff performance and morale.

In the final paper of this special issue, Lukin takes a very different angle again, with a fine-grained analysis of an interview with a panel of 'military experts' on an Australian current affairs programme at the time of the Coalition's invasion of Iraq. Taking Hasan's (1983, 1996) message semantics as her methodology, Lukin asks the highly motivated question: 'What makes a good question?' The paper provides a detailed analysis of question types that is based, on the one hand, on their lexicogrammatical structure and, on the other, on the function of these different types within discourse, particularly as they either elicit specific answers or allow the interviewees to expand according to their own purposes. This relationship between form and function is at the heart of the SFL enterprise and here demonstrates how, while seemingly in control of the interview, the interviewer in practice allows his guests to take charge of the ideological direction the discussion takes, enabling them to define events in their own terms rather than calling them to account. Lukin's paper, then, more than the others in this special issue, aims to make the practices of seasoned practitioners visible to the practitioners themselves, rather than just to apprentices. Here the 'experience and intuition' of the practitioner is not something to be copied, but something to be critiqued, with the critique serving not only as the basis for discussion with professional interviewers, prompting them to reflect on the repercussions of their own practice, but also to reveal invisible ideologies to the general public, the goal of Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough 1992).

5 Conclusion

One question that has been hinted at in the various papers but is not directly covered is how we, as applied linguists, follow up on our research once we have made visible, and had made visible to us, significant features of the texts we have analysed. What comes out from all the papers is the need to return to the different stakeholders and to discuss our findings with them in various ways. Most obviously, there is a need to talk to the practitioner-gatekeepers and discuss with them how our findings can help them *renew contact* with

those aspects of their practice that had become naturalized to them. In making the naturalized *re-visible*, our findings should prompt reflection from those involved on areas of agreement and disagreement, as well as on any new avenues that might open up: a move which should lead to new insights both for the gatekeepers and the analysts and which might serve to inform our various practices. For seasoned practitioners and trainers our findings can provide an increased awareness of the hidden repercussions of their practices, either on their own performances or on those around them, particularly in how they provide scaffolding for students and trainees. Conversely, our discussions with apprentices can help them see not only what they are supposed to do but also why, relating valued practices to institutional goals in different contexts. And as applied linguists, our discussions with practitioners and apprentices can help us renew our own connection with the realities of practice in context and so refine and question our analytical categories and the mediational means we use in establishing them, always considering *what* we are making visible, for whom, with what limitations of gaze, and in joint purpose with whom.

Acknowledgements

About the authors

Tom Bartlett is a Senior Lecturer in Language and Communication at Cardiff University, Wales. His research interests include the language of participatory democracy, text and social context and information flow. His most recent book-length publication is *Hybrid Voices and Collaborative Change: Recontextualising Positive Discourse Analysis* (2012, Routledge). Address for correspondence: CLCR, John Percival Building, Colum Road, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, Wales, UK. Email: bartlettt@cardiff.ac.uk

Honglin Chen is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her research interests span second language education, writing development, educational linguistics, and language policy and curriculum. Address for correspondence: Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia. Email: honglin@uow.edu.au

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